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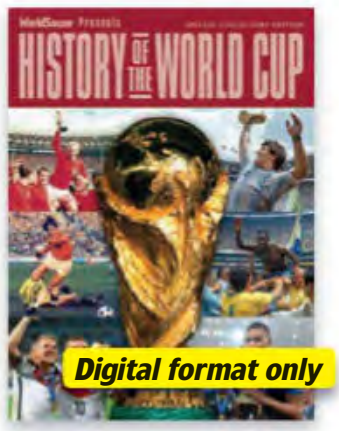

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Contents

IN THIS ISSUE...

Welcome to the 2024-25 season.

As always, to kick off the new campaign we've tapped into our network of experts from around Europe to bring you the most eye-catching talking points from the biggest leagues as well as some of the smaller – yet no less interesting – ones.

Away from Europe, Japan and South Korea's top flights are approaching the business end with big upsets on the cards, while the rest of Asia is gearing up for a revamped Champions League. Plus, we've taken a look ahead to the key games in the September international break.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

FEATURES

24 Lamine Yamal
Player biography

43 2024-25 season preview
Your essential guide to 12 major European leagues

THE WORLD THIS MONTH

People in the news...on and off the pitch

4 **In pictures**
12 **Henry Winter** The voice of football
14 **Keir Radnedge** Saudis set for 2034
16 **Jonathan Wilson** Big-man season
17 **Reports we couldn't make up**
18 **Biggest summer transfers**
19 **The month in numbers**

HEADLINERS

20 **K-League**
21 **Al Qadsiah**
22 **Machida Zelvia**
23 **Bordeaux**
23 **Mexico**

EYEWITNESS

30 **Montenegro**
34 **Sweden**

COACH PROFILE

38 **Kieran McKenna**

SEASON PREVIEW

44 **England**
47 **Austria**
48 **Spain**
51 **Croatia**
52 **Germany**
55 **Greece**
56 **Italy**
59 **Scotland**
60 **France**
63 **Turkey**
64 **Portugal**
66 **Netherlands**

LEAGUE FOCUS

68 **Bulgaria**

SPOTLIGHT

70 **Michael Olise**

FACE TO FACE

74 **Hakan Ericson**

SPECIAL REPORT

76 **Asian Champions League Elite**

WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

80 **Euro 2025 qualifying round-up**

22

38

70

80

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Exclusive subscription offer
See page 10

World Service

Exclusive reports from our worldwide network of correspondents

86

84 2024 Olympics tournament reviews
88 2026 World Cup qualifiers South America
90 2026 World Cup qualifiers Asia
92 UEFA Nations League 2024-25 preview
94 CONCACAF Nations League 2024-25 preview
96 AFCON 2025 qualifying preview
98 Caribbean Club Shield review

PLUS 100 Europeada 101 Global diary 102 2024-25 European league fixtures 112 Results, tables, fixtures

In Pictures

The global game caught on camera

United States...the Yankee Stadium in New York during a pre-season friendly between Manchester City and Milan. One of baseball's most famous arenas was converted into a football ground for the game

Spain...a tearful Endrick is presented as a Real Madrid player after completing his move to Spain from Palmeiras *(more in our La Liga preview on page 48)*

Argentina...Marcelo Gallardo, one of River Plate's most successful managers, is greeted after returning to the Argentine giants

England...Harry Kane returns to Tottenham for the first time since leaving Spurs last summer, coming on for Bayern Munich in a pre-season friendly

Japan...Newcastle United are cheered on by their Japanese fanbase during a pre-season friendly v Urawa Red Diamonds

Curacao...Jamaican side Arnett Gardens lift the Caribbean Football Union Club Shield after beating Antigua's Grenades in the final *(more on page 98)*

Northern Ireland... Spain celebrate winning the Under-19 European Championship after beating France 2-0 in the final in Belfast

France...Argentina's Olympic clash with Morocco is played out in front of an empty stadium after crowd trouble disrupted the men's opening game *(more on page 17)*

France...tempers flare as ugly scenes overshadow the end of France and Argentina's Olympic quarter-final tie

France...Morocco fans dominate the Stade Velodrome in Marseille during their men's Olympic semi-final clash with Spain *(more on page 84)*

France...Brazil forward Marta is inconsolable after being red-carded against Spain in the Olympics group stage

France...Germany keeper Ann-Katrin Berger scores from the penalty spot in the Olympic quarter-final shootout win over Canada *(more on page 86)*

France...*Les Bleus* legend Zinedine Zidane carries the Olympic torch during the opening ceremony of the Paris Summer Games

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New Column

Henry WINTER
THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

Players key to Carsley's future

England's interim boss...Lee Carsley

The key question over whether Lee Carsley can go from England's interim head coach to permanent appointment is simple: will Jude Bellingham, Phil Foden and the players buy in?

If the players respond positively to Carsley's opening address, his first training session at St George's Park and his attacking tactics and game management in the forthcoming UEFA Nations League ties – coupled, of course, with England wins – then momentum will build around the 50-year-old's suitability for the job long-term.

Players taking to Carsley as man and manager would certainly make the FA's life a lot easier. The pool of potential candidates is hardly deep. Eddie Howe is busy building Newcastle United. Mauricio Pochettino is out of the running, having been tempted by the USA men's job. Graham Potter is currently out of work and would surely be in by now if he truly was the FA's Preferred One. Superstar names like Jurgen Klopp and Pep Guardiola are likely beyond the FA's reach and budget.

Carsley, the Birmingham-born former Republic of Ireland international, was very much raised through the English system, as club player and coach, and is perceived as "homegrown" by the FA. His elevation to the seniors would be vindication of FA planning and pathways. It has worked elsewhere: Lionel Scaloni and Luis de la Fuente led Argentina and Spain respectively to glory following their promotion from development sides. Gareth Southgate himself climbed up from the Under-21s.

Many of the players know Carsley. He has been around the camp before, working at tournaments for Southgate. He coached Bellingham, Bukayo Saka, Cole Palmer, Anthony Gordon, Kobbie Mainoo and Adam Wharton in the Under-21s. He coached Foden in Manchester City's Under-18s.

And consider this: Spain v England, big UEFA final, and a skilful, youthful wide player causes so much chaos the opposition tries to kick him. No, not Lamine Yamal nor Nico Williams in Berlin. It's Palmer leading Spain such a merry dance in the European Under-21 Championship showdown in Batumi last year that he was targeted by Juan Miranda.

As before all games, Carsley told Palmer to go out and express himself. Palmer even dribbled through his own defensive third early in the second

Popular...Anthony Gordon has praised Carsley's man-management

half. Morgan Gibbs-White delivered a clever backheel to Max Aarons. The players loved the license to thrill granted by Carsley. He's bolder than Southgate, a quality England's loyal, long-standing match-going supporters craved in Germany. Carsley just has to stick to his beliefs, and be fearless.

Against Spain in that final, he started a midfield of Palmer, Angel Gomes, Curtis Jones and Emile Smith Rowe with Gibbs-White supporting Gordon. That's an incredibly attacking front six, including double pivots in Gomes and Jones who've operated for their clubs as No.10s. Carsley played a left-winger at centre-forward, Gordon, who was named Player of the Tournament. Southgate gave Gordon six minutes in Germany.

Comparing the levels, demands and pressures of Under-21s to senior football is unwise and unfair. Every decision gets ten times the scrutiny. Carsley played a right-back, Aarons, on the left. Southgate did similar, starting Kieran Trippier until Luke Shaw regained a fitness of sorts, and was berated for it.

For all his familiarity with some players, his progressive approach and Under-21 silverware, Carsley still has to win over the seniors. He represented the Republic with distinction on 40 occasions, including for a minute at the 2002 World Cup, but has never experienced the unique pressures that stalk England.

Southgate had, and was a bigger playing name, too. Carsley's players are all coached by stellar characters at club level, greats like Pep Guardiola and Carlo Ancelotti. Carsley has some convincing to do.

> For all his familiarity with some players, his progressive approach and Under-21 silverware, Carsley still has to win over the seniors

He has to set a tone that is authoritative and collaborative in that first meeting. He possesses the rhetoric. On the eve of the Under-21s final, Carsley spoke powerfully to the players of his belief in them.

The players will be watching how he handles the media, something that Southgate did so adeptly. Carsley will face tougher questioning than he's ever experienced before, over players he's omitted, his choice of captain, whether England can learn to keep the ball better, whether he will sing both anthems in Dublin on September 7, and will England win the 2026 World Cup?

He will be asked whether Southgate should have played Palmer and Gordon more. He will be tested on subjects beyond headers and volleys. He'll be grilled about the workload of players like Foden (69 games last season), the potential for burnout and whether he would back a players' strike. Questions will stray into politics, inevitably poppies (the Republic visit Wembley in November when England will be in full poppy bloom).

Carsley's bright enough to dodge the curve-balls. He must be tough having been taught Gaelic football by his cousins on holidays in Dunmanway, County Cork. He also keeps the occasional madness of his profession in perspective. His 25-year-old son Connor lives with Down's Syndrome. Carsley, who was at Everton at the time of Connor's birth, soon realised that life would never be the same again, and that he couldn't be a self-absorbed footballer. It inevitably makes him a more rounded person. He knows when he talks to players that they, too, may have issues in their family life. Gordon is on record extolling Carsley's people skills.

Such was the Under-21s' togetherness under Carsley that all his players made sure all the back-room staff were involved in the celebration photos in 2023. It's down to the players now whether Carsley gets put in the senior picture.

Toffees need new leadership

With Everton's ownership future still uncertain, one of many wishes for the new season is that the Toffees get a good new owner, someone with funds, business sense, empathy with a passionate and long-suffering fanbase, and a long-term plan. Everton have history, support, a hard-working manager, some decent players and a magnificent, game-changing stadium on the horizon in every sense. Everton are worth buying.

Everton's next buyer?...John Textor reportedly made a bid for the Toffees in August

Payback time for fans

It is time the Premier League played fair with supporters and acknowledged their significant role as part of the show, and part of the reason why TV forks out £6.8 billion for rights. The fans deserve a slice of the action – like extras in the background of a film – and their "match fees" incorporated into more equable ticket prices.

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Saudis set for 2034 World Cup

FIFA have all but rubber-stamped proposals for the 2034 finals

Bid book...FIFA president Gianni Infantino receives Saudi Arabia's official bid book at a ceremony in Paris

Three days into the Olympic Games, when the sporting world's focus was on Paris, so FIFA slipped out a note that countries chasing hosting rights for football's 2030 and 2034 World Cups had handed in their bid books.

No fewer than seven countries were tied in: Saudi Arabia alone for 2034 after an amalgam of Spain, Argentina, Morocco, Paraguay, Portugal and Uruguay for the 2030 event.

In days gone by, the prospect of federations from seven states with all their PR teams jousting for the World Cup would deliver a marvellous years-long media circus. Not now. FIFA have cut out all the middle men and women and taken the effective decision-making in-house.

Hence the dog's dinner of 2030 – which will start in South America then continue in North Africa and Iberia – had long been served up. Also, Infantino's FIFA has been champing at the bit to saddle up Saudi Arabia just as soon as diplomatically (or undiplomatically) possible.

FIFA's statement as to the nuts and bolts noted: "FIFA will thoroughly assess the bid books and publish its evaluation report in the fourth quarter of 2024. Should the relevant hosting requirements be met, the Extraordinary FIFA Congress will subsequently take a decision on the appointment of the hosts for the 2030 and 2034 editions of the FIFA World Cup later this year."

In other words: rubber stamp.

For traditionalists, 2030 – the centenary World Cup – should have gone to South America alone, but who cares about tradition when far more money and political friends can be made elsewhere? It is what it is and everyone knows it and can already count the dollars.

For the finals of 2034, which were once envisaged for China, Saudi Arabia is proposing 15 stadia in five cities: Riyadh, Jeddah, Al Khobar, Abha and the still-nebulous megacity of Neom. Of the 15, 11 would be new-builds including Neom in the northwest which will be sited "350 metres above ground level."

The Saudis believe that Qatar 2022 has softened the way for them over issues such as immigrant workers' conditions, human rights (including but not only women's and LGBTI

> "FIFA set clear human rights standards that any bidding country must meet, yet it is clear that Saudi Arabia's bid for the 2034 World Cup currently falls far short"
>
> Steve Cockburn, Amnesty International's head of labour rights and sport

concerns), alcohol availability and summer temperatures. Qatar has also opened the way for another winter World Cup; everyone proved it could work, despite initial European gripes.

Not everyone sees it like the Saudis. Amnesty International found flaws in the 2030 bid book but was damning about the 2034 proposal, claiming "Saudi Arabia has still failed to commit to fundamental reform of its exploitative labour system, or commit to take action to improve freedom of expression, end the repression of human rights activists or remove laws that discriminate against women and LGBTI people."

In other words, it is driving a coach and horses through FIFA's own bidding conditions, which had been put in place after the 2018/2022 process.

Steve Cockburn, Amnesty's head of labour rights and sport, says: "FIFA set clear human rights standards that any bidding country must meet, yet it is clear that Saudi Arabia's bid for the 2034 World Cup currently falls far short. The bid's human rights plan simply ignores many of the enormous risks associated with hosting a mega sporting event in a country with such an atrocious human rights record.

"Saudi Arabia's World Cup human rights plan says nothing about the brutal muzzling of human rights activists or criminalisation of LGBTI people, nor does it outline whether or how it will put an end in practice to the abusive *kafala* system that exploits migrant workers. It is astonishing that such blatant risks can be so flagrantly ignored."

Astonishing? Other words may be used but not "astonishing" for anyone who follows sports event bidding.

The Saudi staging will be the *piece de resistance* in Infantino's strategy to make FIFA and the World Cup financially inviolable through the capture of Saudi Arabia. Critics see it the other way round: that FIFA and world football have been taken prisoner by Saudi Arabia's all-powerful Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman.

Initially Infantino showed his hand back in 2018 after trying to railroad through Saudi financial support for his expanded Club World Cup, he acquiesced in the Saudis' potential joint 2030 bid with Egypt and Greece, then threw FIFA support behind the distractingly daft Saudi proposal to hold a World Cup every two years.

As for human rights organisations' protests in 2034, Infantino will be long gone from office. Under current rules, his likely third term ends in 2031. While his successor copes with the PR fall-out, so Infantino may attend the 2034 World Cup final as merely a happy, 64-year-old guest of honour declaring: "Today, I feel Saudi".

THE UNAPPRECIATED HAYATOU

Issa Hayatou's grip on African football has been appreciated far more in his absence than in his presence. The 77-year-old, who died in his adopted home city of Paris on the eve of the Olympic Games men's football final, had been disparaged for much of his three-decade reign over the African game.

Born in Garoua in the north of Cameroon, Hayatou veered away from domestic politics after athletics and basketball success propelled him into the Cameroon Football Federation as general secretary, vice-president and then president. He stepped down in 1988 on being elected president of CAF and was subsequently a FIFA vice-president from 1992 to 2017.

His command of African votes rendered him invaluable to FIFA presidents Joao Havelange and then Sepp Blatter and played no small role in the historic award to South Africa of the 2010 World Cup. Hayatou's longevity even saw him become interim FIFA president in late 2015 after Blatter was suspended by world football's governing body.

Previously he had challenged Blatter for the leadership of the world game in 2002 but, despite support for him from UEFA, many African countries voted for Blatter as Hayatou lost by 139 votes to 56.

Then in 2016 his judgement failed him. Hayatou backed Asia's Sheikh Salman against Gianni Infantino for the FIFA presidency. Infantino, on winning, wasted little time removing Hayatou from the finance committee then saw to it that Madagascar's little-known Ahmad Ahmad ousted Hayatou at CAF a year later. Ahmad's reign proved a disaster from which CAF is still recovering.

Hayatou was admired for his efforts in pushing the African agenda in world football, and revitalised the continent's annual club competitions by introducing the CAF Champions League and CAF Confederation Cup.

He was also protective of the timing of the Africa Cup of Nations finals as a biennial event, and refused to buckle to criticism from European club coaches over the timing of the event, insistent on Africa's right to host its flagship tournament at its convenience.

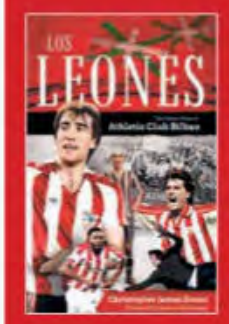
Keir Radnedge & Mark Gleeson

Unappreciated...Issa Hayatou when in the role of acting FIFA president back in December 2015

BOOKS THIS MONTH

THE AJAX WAY
By Dylan O'Connell (Pitch Publishing)

The Ajax Way is a map of European football which tells the story of the game's tactical development through the club that spawned Total Football. Packed with tactical insight and social history, this is a story – with Ajax Amsterdam and their roster of stars at its core – that spans three centuries and stretches across the globe, sparing no detail in exploring Ajax's rich history and the various teams they've inspired.



LOS LEONES
By Christopher James Evans (Pitch Publishing)

Los Leones: The Unique Story of Athletic Club Bilbao tells the incredible story of the unique Basque club. Along with Real Madrid and Barcelona, Athletic Club have never been relegated, and *Los Leones'* rich history and Basque-only philosophy cause intrigue across the footballing world. Exclusive interviews with former legends and prominent journalists provide the historical and political context of what makes Athletic so special.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Big-man season

The 2024-25 campaign could see the return of the target-man

It wasn't quite the big-man summer it looked like it might be. There was a moment in the first week of the Euros when it seemed the tournament might be witnessing the unexpected renaissance of the target-man but, as it turned out, Niclas Fullkrug, Wout Weghorst, Olivier Giroud and Ivan Toney were limited to cameos, while Cristiano Ronaldo and Romelu Lukaku – both now transformed into target-men as their pace and mobility declines – were largely notable for their ineffectiveness. Alvaro Morata, meanwhile, for all he captained the winning team, remains a baffling presence, with the physique of a big man but few of the attributes.

The impact made by Fullkrug and Weghorst in particular was striking. In both cases, there was a sense that they were a Plan B, an option from the bench. In the modern game, with five substitutions giving coaches a great deal of flexibility, the capacity to change the dynamic of a match is a valuable one. Fullkrug scored against Scotland and Switzerland, and against both Hungary and Switzerland he was vital in dragging the game towards Germany when it seemed to be drifting away. It was just after his introduction that they scored their second against Denmark in the last 16, and he allowed them to go more direct against Spain in the quarter-final which brought an equaliser if not, ultimately, victory.

Weghorst, similarly, against both Turkey and England, performed a valuable service, despite only touching the ball occasionally. By giving the Netherlands the option of going long, he allowed their midfield to drop deeper, closer to the defensive line, to make a more compact shape. That was why England, so dominant against the Netherlands in the first half of their semi-final, were unable to play through them in the same way in the second half, and why Turkey lost the lead against them in the quarter-finals.

The return of the big man...Germany's Niclas Fullkrug has signed for West Ham

France, in a less dramatic way, simply looked more balanced with Giroud on the pitch than Ousmane Dembele, in part because of the outlet he offered and in part because that allowed Kylian Mbappe to return to his preferred role on the left. Ivan Toney, quite apart from his penalty in the shootout against Switzerland, played his disruptive part in England's comeback against Slovakia.

Yet the starters fared less well. Ronaldo might still have a role to play, but not until his ego catches up with his diminishing physical capabilities. Whatever Lukaku did before the 2022 World Cup that afflicted him with awful luck in front of goal has not yet been atoned for. And Morata, after scoring in Spain's opening game against Croatia, was a weirdly intermittent presence.

Could it be, then, that the big man is best deployed in the modern game from the bench? Could it be his role is now to stretch games against weary opponents? And even if that is the case at international level, does it map across to the club game?

Could it be, then, that the big man is best deployed in the modern game from the bench?

Target-man...Wout Weghorst in an aerial battle during the Euros

Fullkrug's £27 million move from Borussia Dortmund to West Ham seems to make sense. They have been used to playing with a mobile target-man in Michail Antonio, but he is now 34 so it makes sense to ease the burden on him, offering a fixed point for the likes of Mohammed Kudus, Crysencio Summerville and Jarrod Bowen to play off. Julen Lopetegui will not play in the same way David Moyes did, but the squad remains set up to pursue that basic ethos of a quick, direct style.

Weghorst's loan move to Manchester United in 2023 didn't really work out (after a stint on loan at Hoffenheim, Weghorst remains at the time of writing a Burnley player), but they have turned to another Dutch target-man, signing the 6ft 4in Joshua Zirkzee from Bologna for £36.5m. He is not prolific, but he is mobile and good with his back to goal and may do for United what Weghorst did for the Netherlands, allowing the midfield to drop a little bit deeper to avoid the sort of vacuum opening up in midfield that so often undermined them last season.

But, of course, the greatest big man plays for United's city rivals and has done so for two years. To describe Erling Haaland as a target-man feels like underplaying what he does. He has terrifying pace and scored 63 league goals in his first two seasons in the Premier League. There was even a six-month spell last season when he didn't score with his head. But he is a big man, with all the benefits that brings in terms of holding the ball up and presenting, on the odd occasion when it's necessary for City, a direct option.

Kai Havertz, Darwin Nunez and Dominic Calvert-Lewin offer varying alternative interpretations of the role. None of this modern generation are pure target-men in the style of, say, a John Toshack or a Niall Quinn. All are more rounded, but there is perhaps a sense that the benefits of having a big lad up top are beginning to be remembered again.

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP

Pitch invaders... one Morocco fan is detained by stadium security

1 OLYMPIC CHAOS

The biggest headlines from the Olympic football tournaments belonged off the pitch. In the men's competition, the opening game between Argentina and Morocco was delayed by a pitch invasion by fans of the African side. After 15 minutes of stoppage time at the end of the game, Argentina defender Cristian Medina equalised for his team in the 106th minute, sparking a furious reaction from opposition fans and causing the referee to evacuate the pitch. A full 90 minutes after the play had been stopped, it was announced that VAR had disallowed the goal for offside. With a few minutes still left on the clock, Argentina head coach Javier Mascherano suggested that the teams shake hands and call it a day, but that wasn't allowed – and so they returned to the pitch at 7pm, four hours after kicking off. Adding to the circus, the referee went over to the pitchside monitor to confirm that Medina was indeed offside when he scored, then made the TV signal to rule it out – all in front of an empty stadium. Morocco resumed play with a free-kick, and that was that. "It's the biggest circus I've ever seen in my life," said Mascherano.

Meanwhile, over in the women's Games, Canada boss Bev Priestman was removed as their Olympic head coach after admitting using a drone to spy on group-stage opponents New Zealand. Amidst the fallout, FIFA docked the reigning gold medallists six points, fined Canada Soccer £175,720, and suspended the 38-year-old Priestman for a year.

2 FALSE IDENTITIES

Kuwaiti Premier League club Kazma had the wind taken out of their sails soon after completing a 7-1 friendly win when it was revealed that their opponents were imposters. During a training camp organised by scouting agency StarMaker Football in Alexandria, Egypt, the Kuwaitis went head-to-head with local third-tier side Telephonat Beni Suef – or so they thought. Instead, a group of amateurs turned up for the game. "Unfortunately, the company was deceived by the representative of the Telephonat Beni Suef club, who later turned out to have no connection to the club," said StarMaker in an apologetic statement. Egypt's Football Association is investigating.

3 GOT TO PICK A POCKET OR TWO

Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta recently hired a team of pickpockets in order to demonstrate to his players the importance of always staying alert. According to *The Athletic*, at the end of a pre-season dinner, the Gunners manager asked his players to stand up and empty their pockets, at which point many realised that their phones, wallets and watches were missing.

4 GOLDEN CONSOLATION

"It's mad, I can't quite believe it. That was certainly the greatest moment of my career." A quote from a jubilant goalscorer describing their heroics after a career-defining moment? Not quite. This was the verdict of Rottach-Egern forward Tobias Schlichtner after notching against Bayern Munich in a pre-season friendly. "It's my fourth time playing against Bayern, and to come off with a goal today is unbelievable – I've been a Bayern fan since childhood." The final score? 14-1 to the Bundesliga giants. In Schlictner's defence, it was an improved effort on last year's scoreline of 27-0.

Tradition...Bayern battle Bavarian side Rottach-Egern in their annual pre-season friendly

"I would like to work with the FA, the Scottish FA, the Welsh and the Northern Irish FA, if we can make it happen. Because it would be brilliant for football, for youth football and football in general"

British Olympic Association chief executive Andy Anson confirms he would like a men's Team GB side at the 2028 Olympics

THE BIGGEST DEALS OF SUMMER 2024

£64.4m	***Julian ALVAREZ***	*(Manchester City to Atletico Madrid)*
£55m	***Dominic SOLANKE***	*(Bournemouth to Tottenham Hotspur)*
£54m	***Pedro NETO***	*(Wolverhampton Wanderers to Chelsea)*
£52.2m	**Leny YORO**	*(Lille to Manchester United)*
£51m	***Dani OLMO***	*(RB Leipzig to Barcelona)*
£50.6m	***Joao NEVES***	*(Benfica to Paris Saint-Germain)*
£50.5m	***Moussa DIABY***	*(Aston Villa to Al Ittihad)*
£50m	***Amadou ONANA***	*(Everton to Aston Villa)*
£45m	**Michael OLISE**	*(Crystal Palace to Bayern Munich)*
£42.4m	**Douglas LUIZ**	*(Aston Villa toJuventus)*
£42.3m	**Joao PALHINHA**	*(Fulham to Bayern Munich)*
£42m	***Riccardo CALAFIORI***	*(Bologna to Arsenal)*
£40m	**Max KILMAN**	*(Wolverhampton Wanderers to West Ham United)*
£38.8m	**ENDRICK**	*(Palmeiras to Real Madrid)*
£38.5m	***Matthijs DE LIGT***	*(Bayern Munich to Manchester United)*
£37.5m	**Ian MAATSEN**	*(Chelsea to Aston Villa)*
£36.5m	**Joshua ZIRKZEE**	*(Bologna to Manchester United)*
£35m	**Elliot ANDERSON**	*(Newcastle United to Nottingham Forest)*
£34.2m	***Willian PACHO***	*(Eintracht Frankfurt to Paris Saint-Germain)*
£34m	***Emile SMITH ROWE***	*(Arsenal to Fulham)*
£33m	**Yankuba MINTEH**	*(Newcastle United to Brighton)*
£30.8m	**SAVINHO**	*(Troyes to Manchester City)*
£30.1m	**Alessandro BUONGIORNO**	*(Torino to Napoli)*
£30m	**Kiernan DEWSBURY-HALL**	*(Leicester City to Chelsea)*
£30m	**Igor THIAGO**	*(Club Brugge to Brentford)*
£29.8m	***Alexander SORLOTH***	*(Villarreal to Atletico Madrid)*
£28.1m	***Artem DOVBYK***	*(Girona to Roma)*
£28m	**Lewis HALL**	*(Chelsea to Newcastle United)**
£27m	***Niclas FULLKRUG***	*(Borussia Dortmund to West Ham United)*
£27m	**Moussa NIAKHATE**	*(Nottingham Forest to Lyon)*
£27m	**David RAYA**	*(Brentford to Arsenal)**
£26.7m	**Mason GREENWOOD**	*(Manchester United to Marseille)*
£25.7m	***Maximilian BEIER***	*(Hoffenheim to Borussia Dortmund)*
£25.7m	***Deniz UNDAV***	*(Brighton to Stuttgart)*
£25.6m	**Mats WIEFFER**	*(Feyenoord to Brighton)*
£25.4m	***Robin LE NORMAND***	*(Real Sociedad to Atletico Madrid)*
£25.3m	**Hiroki ITO**	*(Stuttgart to Bayern Munich)*
£25m	**Archie GRAY**	*(Leeds United to Tottenham Hotspur)*
£25m	***Crysencio SUMMERVILLE***	*(Leeds United to West Ham United)*
£24.9m	**Davide FRATTESI**	*(Sassuolo to Internazionale)**
£24.1m	**Ernest NUAMAH**	*(RWD Molenbeek to Lyon)**
£23.9m	***Brajan GRUDA***	*(Mainz to Brighton)*
£22.5m	***Fabio CARVALHO***	*(Liverpool to Brentford)*
£22m	**Omari HUTCHINSON**	*(Chelsea to Ipswich Town)**
£21.9m	***Matias SOULE***	*(Juventus to Roma)*
£21.4m	***Elye WAHI***	*(Lens to Marseille)*
£21m	**Charles DE KETELAERE**	*(Milan to Atalanta)**
£20.7m	***Filip JORGENSEN***	*(Villarreal to Chelsea)*
£20m	**Taylor HARWOOD-BELLIS**	*(Manchester City to Southampton)**
£20m	**Luis SINISTERRA**	*(Leeds United to Bournemouth)**
£19.5m	**Luis GUILHERME**	*(Palmeiras to West Ham United)*
£19.4m	**Enzo LE FEE**	*(Rennes to Roma)*
£19m	**Waldemar ANTON**	*(Stuttgart to Borussia Dortmund)*

Italicised players denote completed transfers since last issue

**Loan deal turned permanent* *Source: The Guardian*

Alexander SORLOTH

To date, Sorloth's career has followed a similar pattern: impress, earn a move, fail, move on, then shine again. The Norway striker first caught the eye in 2015 with Bodo/Glimt, but a subsequent move to Eredivisie side Groningen failed to work out. He rediscovered his goalscoring form at Midtjylland to earn a move to Crystal Palace, but flopped again. His best season came on loan at Trabzonspor, notching 24 goals on loan in Turkey, but then he only managed five in the Bundesliga for RB Leipzig. Spain appears to be where he is most comfortable: 16 goals in two seasons on loan at Real Sociedad set up last summer's switch to Villarreal, where he scored 23 goals to earn his biggest transfer to date. Joining one of Spain's elite clubs in Atletico Madrid represents the highest point of Sorloth's career thus far. At his 11th team, can he continue upwards, or is he set to quickly plummet back down again?

Julian ALVAREZ

Selling Alvarez for a club record fee of £64.4m – rising to £81.5m – concludes a remarkable bit of business for Manchester City, who could bank a profit of £67.5m for a player they snapped up just two years ago. The English champions are highly adept at extracting maximum value from fringe players. Last summer they sold Riyad Mahrez and Aymeric Laporte for over £50m combined; in 2022, Raheem Sterling, Gabriel Jesus and Oleksandr Zinchenko fetched around £120m, while Ferran Torres joined Barcelona for £46.3m in January 2022 – the same month Alvarez agreed to join City. Atletico have also gained one of the best young forwards around with the potential to thrive under fellow Argentine Diego Simeone – a deal that suits everybody involved.

Fabio CARVALHO

Like Alvarez, this is a deal that represents fine business for all concerned. Liverpool have cashed in on a player that joined them for £5m in 2022, while Carvalho returns to West London having come through Fulham's academy. After impressing on loan at Hull City in the second half of last season, contributing nine goals and two assists in 20 games in England's second tier, the 22-year-old is an exciting addition to the Bees' frontline.

Matias SOULE

Ahead of his first full season as Roma coach, club legend Daniele De Rossi is quietly building an impressive looking side. While the arrival of Artem Dovbyk – last season's top scorer in La Liga with 24 goals – will attract the most headlines, Soule might be the more exciting. With 11 goals and three assists on loan at relegated Frosinone last season, the 21-year-old Argentine clearly has the talent to succeed at this level. With an attack that already includes Stephan El Shaarawy and Tammy Abraham, and with the shackles applied by Jose Mourinho now released, the Romans should provide plenty of entertainment.

Willian PACHO

With Moises Caicedo struggling to live up to last summer's hefty price tag, Pacho is now arguably the standout graduate of the famed Independiente del Valle academy in Ecuador. The tall, left-footed centre-back was outstanding for his country at this summer's Copa America, and will provide stiff competition for PSG's established defenders.

"There was…a box with a pig's head and a bullet in the forehead, and a note that said that if I returned to [Rosario] Central, the next head was that of my daughter"

Argentina legend Angel Di Maria reveals why he pulled out of a move to first club Rosario from Benfica

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month…

9
European Under-19 Championships won by Spain after they defeated France in the 2024 final, making them the most successful country in the tournament's history.

£2.09m
Fine handed out to Manchester City by the Premier League for persistently delaying kick-offs.

38
Years since Mircea Lucescu last managed Romania, before he took charge of his national team again. The 79-year-old is one of the most decorated coaches of all time, with over 30 trophies to his name.

1
Asian teams owned by Red Bull after the MCO group added Japanese third-tier outfit Omiya Ardija to their club stable.

13
Trophies won for River Plate by manager Marcelo Gallardo, who returned to the club after 20 months away.

Returning hero… Gallardo won two Copas Libertadores at River Plate

12
Tier of English football the Premier League's all-time record appearance maker is playing in after ex-Aston Villa, Manchester City and Everton midfielder Gareth Barry signed for Hurstpierpoint at the age of 43.

Trophy number 27… Real Madrid captain Luka Modric lifts the UEFA Super Cup

27
Number of trophies won at Real Madrid by Luka Modric, making him the most decorated player in the club's history, after winning the 2024 UEFA Super Cup.

878
Professional matches played for club and country by Portugal defender Pepe – which included 141 international caps and a staggering 34 trophies – before announcing his retirement.

7
Countries whose FAs were sanctioned for racist or discriminatory behaviour by their fans at Euro 2024 – Albania, Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia.

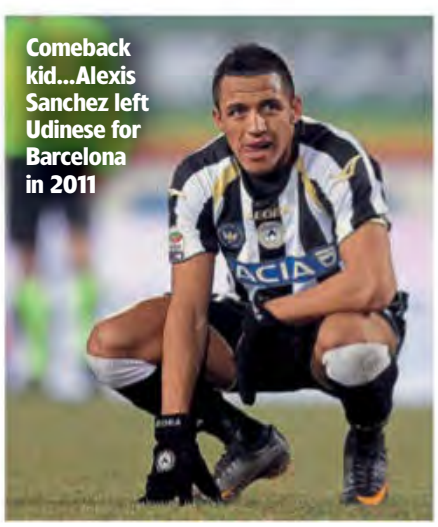
434
Days between David De Gea's last game for Manchester United and his move to Italian side Fiorentina.

3
World Cup winners in the dressing room of newly-promoted Serie A club Como, after France defender Raphael Varane and Spanish goalkeeper Pepe Reina were signed by coach Cesc Fabregas.

63
Scotland caps won by Celtic skipper Callum McGregor, who recently announced his international retirement.

22
Number of penalties taken in the shootout – with both goalkeepers scoring – that decided the Uruguayan Torneo Intermedio, as Nacional edged Montevideo rivals Penarol 8-7 on spot-kicks after a 1-1 draw.

18
Years since Alexis Sanchez first joined Udinese. The Chile forward re-joined the club after being released by Internazionale.



Comeback kid…Alexis Sanchez left Udinese for Barcelona in 2011

99
Croatia caps won by Marcelo Brozovic after the Al Nassr midfielder retired from international football.

7
Months that former Australia star Harry Kewell lasted as manager of Yokohama F. Marinos before being sacked by the Japanese side.

6
Olympic Games that Brazil legend Marta has appeared at after the forward took part in Paris 2024.

Bowing out?… Marta is expected to quit playing for Brazil

6
Ex-Ajax players that Erik ten Hag has signed for Manchester United after Matthijs de Ligt and Noussair Mazraoui joined Christian Eriksen, Andre Onana, Lisandro Martinez and Antony at Old Trafford.

19
New Barcelona shirt number handed to Lamine Yamal for the 2024-25 campaign – the jersey previously worn at the club by a young Lionel Messi.

373
Barcelona appearances made by Sergi Roberto following the captain's summer exit from the club after 18 years.

K-League

Huge shocks on the cards at both ends of South Korea's top flight

Could South Korea's army team finally become national champions? For the past few years, the K-League title race has been dominated by Ulsan Hyundai (now known as Ulsan HD) and Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors. Not in 2024 though. Ulsan are still in the mix – though lost two-time title-winning coach Hong Myung-bo in July – but Jeonbuk are in a relegation battle for the first time in their history.

The absence of the Greens has left the path open for others to challenge but nobody saw Gimcheon Sangmu coming through for a title tilt. Owned by Korea Armed Forces Athletic Corps, the club exists to give professional football players at other clubs somewhere to complete their 18-month military service, which all able-bodied males must start by the time they are 28. They still have to get their hair cut, collect a monthly salary of around £400 and be confined to base but it is better than standing guard on a snowy mountain near the border with North Korea in minus 30 degree temperatures.

Sangmu's track record has rarely been something for conscripts to write home to waiting partners about. Last season they achieved promotion back to the top tier after a season in K2 but expectations were not high. A 5-1 loss to FC Seoul in the fifth game seemed to suggest another struggle, but that was followed by an 11-game unbeaten streak as coach Chung Jung-yong tightened things up at the back.

This is the 55-year-old's first season in the top tier, but he was named as Asian coach of 2019 after leading South Korea to the final of the Under-20 World Cup. That was a major achievement but a league title would be bigger given the obstacles that Sangmu always face.

All their players are on loan and come and go on a regular basis. It would make it easier if this was confined to the close season but that is not the case. In mid-July (the season starts in March), coach Chung lost 17 members who returned to their former clubs to resume their professional careers including captain Won Du-jae. At least there was an influx just prior to this with talented midfielders Lee Dong-gyeong and Lee Dong-jun arriving, both of whom have international caps.

Under pressure... Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors face an unprecedented relegation battle

Still, the constant change makes it hard to challenge and low crowds do not help. The club, currently based in the central city of Gimcheon, have moved around over the years, and it is hard for fans to identify with players who are there for a season and a half. Not just that but there is a lack of professional marketing or community experts to build local ties – not something that is a strength in Korean football anyway.

Winning the title would be a dream and even a top-three finish would be seriously impressive. Unfortunately, that would not grant entry to the AFC Champions League, as the Asian Football Confederation does not regard Gimcheon as a professional club.

> It is hard to say which would be more shocking, a title for the soldiers or relegation for the Motors

There was nothing amateur about Gimcheon's 4-0 win over Korea's most successful club Jeonbuk on July 14. It showed that anything was possible for both clubs. It is hard to say which would be more shocking, a title for the soldiers or relegation for the Motors. Last season, four-time champions Suwon Samsung Bluewings went down but those former giants had purse strings cut and had been circling the plughole for a while.

Jeonbuk, with nine titles from 2009 to 2021 and two Asian Champions Leagues, finished second and fourth in the last two seasons and still have a hefty wage bill by K-League standards.

Backed by Hyundai Motors, Jeonbuk have still been active in the transfer market. In June 2023, Park Ji-sung, who was technical director at the club, recommended appointing Dan Petrescu as coach to bring in some European knowhow and attacking football. The Romanian lasted less than a year.

In came Czech defender Tomas Petrasek and Ghanaian midfielder Nana Boateng, once on Manchester City's books. It never really clicked and the Motors stalled to finish fourth at the end of 2023, their lowest finish since 2007. The football was more direct than fans were used to and not quite the attacking, fluid style that Park Ji-sung had hoped for.

Petrescu could say, with some justification, that he had not had much time and there were injuries to key players, but there was pressure heading into the 2024 season. The former Chelsea defender did not last long and was out after just a few weeks. Neither Park Won-jae or Kim Do-heon have been able to turn it around.

There is still enough talent to get out of the mire, but Gimcheon Sangmu's position near the top proves that anything can happen.

John Duerden

Al Qadsiah

The Saudi Pro League has yet another ambitious, big-spending club

In the summer of 2023, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) took over the country's four biggest clubs and many felt that would be that as far as the title hopes of the rest of the country went, for a few years at least. Al Hilal, Al Nassr, Al Ittihad and Al Ahli were successful even before the massive injection of funds and here they were signing Neymar, Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema and Riyad Mahrez. Even established clubs such as Al Shabab, with six championships in their Riyadh trophy room, complained at the far from level playing field.

It may not, however, be Shabab that are the focus of non-Big Four headlines for the 2024-25 season, which kicked off in late August, as Al Qadsiah have been making waves. A year earlier, a little lost amid the PIF news, was Aramco's takeover of the club based in the eastern city of Khobar. Qadsiah were then in the second division but were suddenly catapulted into the big financial leagues. The Saudi Arabian Oil Group is, according to *Forbes*, the sixth most valuable company in the world, just behind Amazon.

Robbie Fowler was given the head coach job in June 2023 but got his marching orders after just four months despite receiving the Manager of the Month awards in both August and September having led the team to second after eight games unbeaten.

The club were not unhappy with the results but wanted a change of direction, so it was not a surprise when Spanish director of football Carlos Anton appointed a new head coach from his own country. Michel had a CV that included European clubs such as Marseille, Olympiacos and Sevilla. He came to Saudi Arabia and successfully guided the team to a stress-free promotion back to the top tier for the first time since 2021.

Former Everton and Real Betis goalkeeper Joel Robles had a solid season between the sticks but the headlines were grabbed by Mbaye Diagne and Luciano Vietto, who managed 43 goals between them. Yet just like Fowler, the Senegalese and Argentine stars have since been released and Robles is unlikely to play much in the top tier.

Unsurprisingly, given their owners, financial muscle and ambitions, the Knights of the East have been busy in the transfer market. Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang has penned a two-year contract, arriving from Marseille. At 35, the Gabon striker is perhaps not quite as sharp as he was at his peak but – a short spell at Chelsea apart – has scored regularly in the big leagues over the past decade. The slower pace of Saudi football may suit the former African Footballer of the Year but regardless, his arrival made waves at a club that has only won a couple of major trophies – and those were over three decades ago in now defunct cup competitions.

> "You can see, in the last years, a lot of improvements and I think it's getting more competitive – and obviously, we're here to bring the level higher"
>
> New Al Qadsiah signing Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang on the Saudi Pro League

"It's getting better and better," Aubameyang said. "You can see, in the last years, a lot of improvements and I think it's getting more competitive – and obviously, we're here to bring the level higher."

Belgium's Euro 2024 goalkeeper Koen Casteels has ended almost a decade in the Bundesliga with Wolfsburg and will be expecting to take the place of Robles between the sticks, while Mexico forward Julian Quinones is an interesting signing. There is more experience in the shape of Nacho, who has left Real Madrid's defence after more than ten years in the Spanish capital to add an even greater Iberian flavour. The 34-year-old will have plenty of team-mates with which to converse in his mother tongue as Uruguayan international midfielder Nahitan Nandez (ex-Cagliari) has also decided to leave Europe for the Middle East, while Argentina's 2024 Olympic midfielder Ezequiel Fernandez has joined from Boca Juniors and Peruvian winger Andre Carrillo was already there.

Despite the relative lack of big signings by the Big Four, it is unlikely that Al Qadsiah will be able to challenge Al Ittihad, who finished fifth, never mind the unstoppable champions Al Hilal. To make the top six would be a major step forward. If that happens and the big names perform well, it may encourage Aramco to put their hands in their limitless pockets to really try for top spot.

John Duerden

Al Qadsiah's new recruits...the newly promoted side have signed Aubameyang, Nacho and Casteels

Machida Zelvia

Newly-promoted upstarts on track for stunning title win in Japan

Machida Zelvia, the 2023 second-division champions and Tokyo's newest first-division club, were the surprise leaders in Japan, five points clear of their nearest rivals, Gamba Osaka and Kashima Antlers, as the J. League entered its mid-summer break in July.

It has certainly been all change in the J1 League this season with Kawasaki Frontale and Yokohama F. Marinos, the two giants of recent years, slipping far down the table and even the new defending champions, Vissel Kobe, struggling to repeat last year's consistency.

Whereas resurgent Gamba (twice) and Kashima (eight times) are both former league champions, Machida are a wholly new face on the block. The little club in Tokyo's western suburbs only won promotion to the J2 League for the first time in 2012 and went straight back down again. They returned for 2016 and spent most of the following eight seasons in the bottom half, but are now playing their first-ever season in the top flight.

The huge turning point came at the start of 2023 with the brave appointment of high school teacher Go Kuroda to succeed the veteran Serbian manager Ranko Popovic, who is now in charge at Kashima.

Kuroda had honed his ideas for 28 years at the helm of Aomori Yamada High School in Japan's far north, and led his team of youngsters to a string of national youth titles; his protégés there included the 2018 World Cup midfielder Gaku Shibasaki. Machida, however, are Kuroda's first senior team as either player or coach.

After finishing 15th in the second division in 2022, Machida won the 2023 second-division title 12 points ahead of runners-up Jubilo Iwata, and they carried that momentum with them into the first division. Machida drew their league opener with Gamba in February but successive wins then followed against Nagoya Grampus, Kashima, Consadole Sapporo and Sagan Tosu before they tasted their first defeat against Sanfrecce Hiroshima.

Upstarts...Machida Zelvia players pose ahead of their clash with Albirex Niigata

Machida is a small club based far from the centre of Tokyo. The GION Stadium where they play most of their home games holds a little over 15,000 spectators and they rarely fill it. Their biggest gate there so far this season was 13,506 for the opening match against Gamba, whereas more than 40,000 attended a "home" game against Yokohama F. Marinos at the National Stadium in July.

Machida have, though, also been much better financed since becoming a member of the media and internet advertising group CyberAgent in 2018. They assembled a strong squad in the second tier and arrived in the first division with a seasoned team and well-established tactics. They also have a large coaching squad and Kuroda is much admired for his delegation skills.

Machida's playing style is best described as direct with tight defensive discipline, rapid forward movement – especially down the wings – and quick balls into the box.

Mastermind...head coach Go Kuroda

That description does little justice, though, to the influential individuals found across the pitch, from Kosovo centre-back Ibrahim Dresevic – a new signing this year from Turkish outfit Fatih Karagumruk – to Australia striker Mitch Duke. The competition is fiercest in the frontline with Brazilian Erik and South Koreans Na Sang-ho and Oh Se-hun.

Other new faces for 2024 included 23-year-old keeper Kosei Tani, on loan from Gamba, who won two Japan caps in 2022 and has been an ever-present between the posts, and 2018 World Cup centre-back Gen Shoji, who joined from Kashima.

The biggest standouts of all, though, have been the two 23-year-old Japan Olympic team forwards, Shota Fujio, Machida's top scorer so far with eight goals by August, and a skilful, swift and creative winger, Yu Hirakawa, who left at the end of July on a six-month loan to English Championship side Bristol City.

Normally, a gap like Hirakawa's would be extremely hard to fill but Machida swooped immediately to sign Japan winger Yuki Soma from Portuguese side Casa Pia, a big signing that bodes well for Machida's prospects of holding on to the top spot.

Machida are already beginning to look more and more like a big club. If they do win the league, they will be the first Tokyo club to do so in the J. League's 32-year history.

Mike Plastow

Bordeaux

Historic French club drop to fourth tier after declaring bankruptcy

It was only 15 years ago that Bordeaux, as French champions, topped a Champions League group featuring Bayern Munich and Juventus. That now seems like a lifetime ago after the club was declared bankrupt, demoted to the French fourth tier and had its players' contracts terminated.

For one of France's most storied clubs, which has boasted great players such as Zinedine Zidane, Jean-Pierre Papin, Bixente Lizarazu, Alain Giresse, Jean Tigana and Sylvain Wiltord – and more recently Aurelien Tchouameni and Jules Kounde – it is a depressing yet predictable outcome.

Back in 2018, the club was sold to two American investment firms, General American Capital Partners' (GACP) and Kings Street Capital (KCP), for €100m. Barely a year later, the two firms clashed and KCP took full control of the club.

As promises spiralled, performances dipped. In June 2021 – amid the COVID pandemic – KCP offloaded the club to Gerard Lopez, and in his first season at the helm Bordeaux were relegated from Ligue 1 in last place. The club seemed to have hit rock bottom, but things continued to get worse. That summer, they were handed an administrative relegation down to the third tier, only to be spared by an appeal. In the following campaign, they finished third in Ligue 2 – normally enough to qualify for the promotion play-offs – but due to the reduction of Ligue 1 from 20 teams down to 18, none took place.

Despair... Bordeaux captain Yoann Barbet

After last term's 12th-place, they were administratively relegated again. Their only hope of rescue was from Fenway Sports Group (FSG), owners of Liverpool, who were considering acquiring Bordeaux as part of a Multi-Club Ownership (MCO) model. But, daunted by the French club's bleak finances, they withdrew.

This time, there was no appeal from Bordeaux and they instead gave up their professional status. This season, they will play as a semi-professional side in the fourth tier of French football.

Bordeaux's relegation does provide some respite for a victim of another English club's MCO model, with Troyes spared relegation from Ligue 2. Fans of the club, which is owned by the City Football Group (CFG), staged angry protests as the team slid down the table last season. Their most egregious complaint was with the use of Brazilian winger Savinho, who was contracted to the French club but never kicked a ball for them and instead spent last season shining in La Liga for high-flying Girona, another CFG team, before joining Manchester City this summer.

Elsewhere in Ligue 2, there will be plenty of interest in the progress of Caen after the club was bought by Kylian Mbappe. The France captain invested an estimated €15m to acquire an 80 per cent stake in the club via his company Interconnected Ventures.

Jamie Evans

Mexico

El Tri turn to two legendary figures to replace Jaime Lozano

With the 2026 World Cup less than two years away, the Mexican Football Federation (FMF) has appointed two familiar figures to lead the national team into the tournament that they will co-host: Javier Aguirre and Rafael Marquez. Former coach Jaime Lozano was replaced after an underwhelming showing at this summer's Copa America, and the FMF wasted little time in appointing his successor.

For 65-year-old Aguirre, this will be his third spell in charge of the national team after leading them at both the 2002 and 2010 World Cups, reaching the last 16 on both occasions. A former international midfielder of 59 caps, he also holds the unwanted record of being the first Mexican to be sent off at a World Cup, doing so on home soil during the 1986 quarter-final with West Germany. His last competitive match as a manager was last season's Copa del Rey final, when his Mallorca side lost on penalties to Athletic Club.

Management duo...Marquez and Aguirre are unveiled

The greater intrigue, though, is likely to be reserved for his assistant. Marquez is a Mexico legend, winning 147 caps for his country and representing them at a joint-record five World Cups. For the past two years the former centre-back has worked as the coach of Barcelona's B team in the third tier of Spanish football, achieving top-four finishes in both seasons in charge and being linked with high-profile jobs – including at Barca.

In light of that, it might be surprising to see him take up a number two role. But Marquez will replace Aguirre in the hot seat after the World Cup.

"Javier has a strong track record, with experience and undisputed leadership in team management, while Rafa has great skill in talent development," said the FMF.

Jamie Evans

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE
WINNER 2023
SPAIN - FRANCE
09 JULY 2024
MUNICH
10
19

ROCAFONDA'S FINEST

How the Barcelona and Spain wonderkid became the most talented teenager on the planet

Words: Bence Bocsak

Albert Puig still remembers the first time he saw Lamine Yamal playing at *La Masia*.

"I was training with a different team at the time, but I remember during the middle of the training session the coach who was in charge of Lamine's trial called me over and said: 'I've got a little bit of a doubt about one boy who is on trial here'," Puig, who worked at Barcelona for over a decade, recalls to *World Soccer*. "So, I went there, and I watched Lamine take the ball in his own half, run past the opposition and get himself in front of the goal."

Only six years old at the time, Yamal was playing against players two years older. Yet, despite his young age, Yamal did what he does best, sending the ball nestling into the top corner with a sensational shot, leaving Puig mesmerised on the sidelines.

"I turned to the other coach and said: 'Exactly what is the doubt that you have?' And he said: 'I was only kidding. I only made you come here to see this phenomenal talent'."

Barcelona were so convinced, they immediately signed Yamal into their Under-7 team. Puig would go on to coach him at Under-9 level but while he remembers a talented kid, he admits back then the difference between him and his peers was not gargantuan. It was only later as he matured that Yamal started to leave his team-mates trailing in his wake.

"He kept developing and improving within the club," Puig says. "I trained him twice. First when he was in the Under-9s and then when he was in the Under-13s. In the Under-9s, he was obviously just a little kid. In the Under-13s, it was more like the beginning of his teenage years. By then, everyone had started to realise that he had a special talent, and he was someone who could become a professional. There was a big gap between him and the other ones in the team."

Normally, *La Masia* would only allow players to live on campus who had been scouted and who had lived outside of the Catalonian region. But for Yamal, who was moving from one

parent to another after they divorced when he was just a young child, it was decided that the club would make an exception in order to make his life easier. It was under Puig that Yamal would move into *La Masia* on a full-time basis for the first time.

"The logistics meant that it was easier for everyone for Lamine to live in *La Masia*," Puig says.

It also allowed Yamal to concentrate on football without any possible distractions. During the season he spent with Puig, the former *La Masia* coach saw him mature and improve every week.

"You got the feeling that you are living, talking to and training with a special kid," Puig says. "From a technical point, he was a special talent when in open situations. Not only one-v-one situations but two or even three against one. He could take the ball and also have the ability to go inside, pass between lines, make combinations with his team-mates,

Right-winger... Yamal has made the position his own for both club and country

assists in the final third and these kinds of things."

Aside from possessing all the technical qualities, Puig also saw a player who was always determined to succeed.

"He was a winner in training. He always wanted to win. When he was playing at Under-16 level, I remember one of the coaches said to me that in the small games at the end of the training session, there was always a little competition.

"If his team wasn't doing well sometimes the coaches would tease him, but then he would go back into the small games and after a few matches his team would be at the top, and he would say: 'What do you have to say to me now?'"

As well as possessing an insatiate desire to win, Yamal was also prepared to constantly measure himself up against the best and challenge himself. Including instructing one of Barcelona's most talented full-backs, Hector Fort, to mark him in training sessions.

"In the academy he really liked to go up against Hector Fort. In these small matches, he always told Hector that he has to mark him. He knew that he was the most difficult opponent from the defensive side and Lamine always wanted to challenge himself."

But while the young Yamal's progression was rapid and excitement within the club's academy ranks grew year after year about his potential, there were challenges along the way.

Initially, *La Masia* coaches were reluctant to promote Yamal into an older age group due to the club's own policy at the time.

"The academy director at *La Masia* didn't believe in putting players in higher age groups, but in Lamine's case we were obligated to do it. Everyone knew he was wasting his time playing with guys of the same age. He needed a challenge in front of him," Puig says.

This change in strategy saw Yamal jump an age group, from Under-14 level to the club's Under-16 side.

"He was still the best in the Under-16 team and then the following season he started playing with the Under-19 team."

At Under-19 level, he once again tested the club's coaches' methods. Initially, Yamal was moved to the left-wing position – a new role for a player who had been accustomed to cutting in from the right onto his left foot.

> "Everyone knew he was wasting his time playing with guys of the same age"
>
> **Ex-Barca youth coach Albert Puig**

European champion ...Yamal after the Euro 2024 final

Historic...Yamal comes on for his Barcelona debut

Key coach...Albert Puig worked for Barca between 2003 and 2014

Tribute...Yamal's iconic celebration dedicated to Rocafonda

> "He's very proud about his origins. When you ask him, he will always say he is from Rocafonda"
> **Albert Puig**

Yamal stood up to the challenge and accepted the new role without any pushback, but it was clear that he was more comfortable on the right.

"He always knew it was the best for his development to follow the coaches' advice. But after he played ten matches in that position, there was a game when he knew everyone was going to come to watch him play. That week, he asked all the coaches at the club that just for that game they let him play on the right wing. He insisted he only wanted to play there that match, just one time.

"I think it was against Sabadell FC. He was amazing. He scored and he gave an assist. From that day on, he never went back to playing on the left. He confirmed that day that he was destined to play on the right."

It's a position that Yamal has since made his own for Barcelona's first

Local hero...a mural dedicated to Yamal in Rocafonda

Where it all began... Rocafonda's local football pitch

team, becoming the youngest player to represent the club in a century after making his debut against Real Betis at just 15 years, nine months and 16 days old. In little time, he established himself as a regular under Xavi during the 2023-24 campaign.

Yamal ended his first full season in senior football with 28 goal contributions for club and country and with countless records broken along the way, from becoming's Spain's youngest-ever debutant to the youngest player at a European Championship.

At Euro 2024, Yamal showcased his exciting talent to millions of fans across the continent. Despite his tender age he has now also made the right-wing role his own for Spain's senior national team – helping Luis de la Fuente's men to a famous victory over England and becoming the youngest player to play in a men's major tournament final in the process.

"He has been so brave," Puig agrees as he looks back on Yamal's tournament. "He was never scared of the actions, and he didn't feel the pressure that a normal 16-year-old would feel in situations like that. He's become so determined and he can already decide matches. He is by far the most special and different player I ever coached at *La Masia*."

Winning the tournament has now thrust Yamal into the spotlight, achieving things that most could only dream of at the same age. But at his core, he remains a normal kid from Rocafonda, a neighbourhood in the town of Mataro, some 30 kilometres up the Catalan coast from Barcelona. The kids that grew up playing in the same town square where Yamal honed his craft are fiercely proud of the suburb's most famous son, and he is equally proud of them. His typical goal celebration, contorting his fingers to display the number 304, is a reference to the local postal code.

"He's very proud about his origins. When you ask him, he will always say he is from Rocafonda," says Puig.

The next challenge will be trying to keep his feet on the ground and to be able to shut out the noise and frenzy that is bound to surround him.

"The most important thing will be the fitness condition and the mind," says Puig. "Now he will have a different life. It will be different when it comes to the motivation, the enjoyment he will have in his daily routine. All of those things will determine if he can stay at this level. About the football level I'm pretty sure he will continue to develop in the same way."

Lamine Yamal

the numbers game

SPAIN

14

CAPS

GOALS

3

EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP YOUNG PLAYER OF THE TOURNAMENT

EURO 2016	EURO 2020	EURO 2024
RENATO SANCHES (Portugal)	PEDRI (Spain)	LAMINE YAMAL (Spain)

YOUTH RECORDS

Lamal is the youngest-ever play to...

- **START IN LA LIGA FOR BARCELONA** 16 years, 38 days *(Barcelona v Cadiz, August 2023)*
- **PLAY AND SCORE FOR SPAIN** 16 years, 57 days *(Spain v Georgia, September 2023)*
- **START IN UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE** 16 years, 83 days *(Barcelona v Porto, October 2023)*
- **SCORE IN LA LIGA** 16 years, 87 days *(Granada v v Barcelona, October 2023)*
- **SCORE IN COPA DEL REY** 16 years, 195 days *(Athletic Club v Barcelona, January 2024)*
- **PLAY IN UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE KNOCKOUT PHASE** 16 years, 223 days *(Barcelona v Napoli, February 2024)*
- **PLAY IN EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP** 16 years, 338 days *(Spain v Croatia, June 2024)*
- **SCORE IN EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP** 16 years, 362 days *(Spain v France, July 2024)*

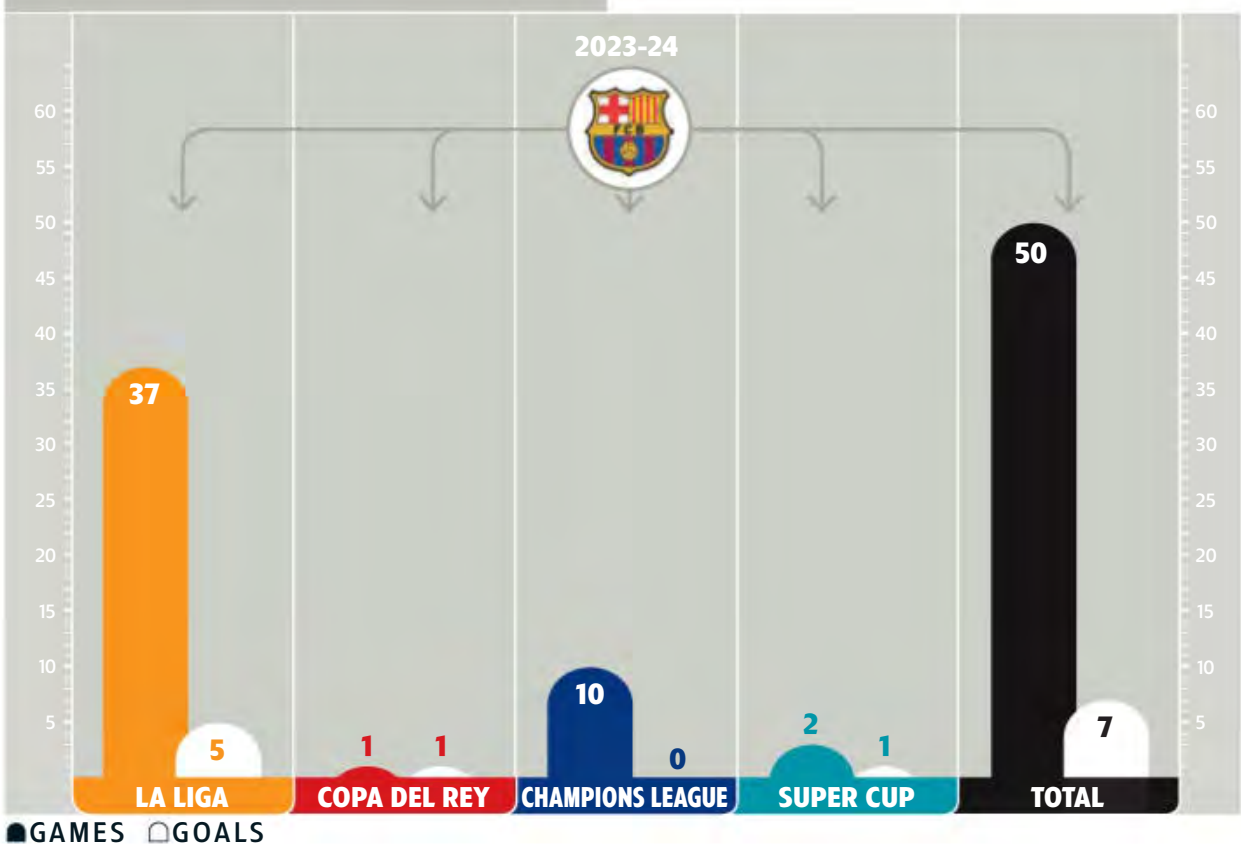


Photo credit:
Brian Jones/TNS FC

eyewitness

Anthony Tomas reports

MONTENEGRO

Decic rise amid Montenegro's decline

Should you blink while travelling south from Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, to the Albanian border, you risk missing the town of Tuzi. Sat in the foothills of the ominously named Accursed Mountains, Tuzi, with its population of approximately 5,000, is an unlikely point of interest on the 2024-25 UEFA Champions League map.

Tuzi is the home of Montenegrin champions FK Decic, who earned a Champions League first qualifying round place after their first-ever title win. In what appears to be a fairy-tale story, Decic were playing in the second tier as recently as 2020, rising to become national champions in just four years and ending FK Buducnost's and FK Sutjeska's seven-year duopoly on the title.

It was an impressive achievement for head coach Milorad Pekovic, who was only appointed in September 2023 having left his role as CSKA Sofia's assistant manager. Yet while the former Montenegro international deserves credit for ending Decic's 98-year wait for a top-flight title, they also had a fair amount of luck, as Richard Wilson, an expert on football in the Former Yugoslavia and host of the *History of Yugoslav Football* podcast, explains: "Decic didn't come from nowhere – they came up a few years ago with a very decent squad and haven't really dropped in standard," he says. "Their title win was more a result of a severe drop-off from Buducnost selling players and an even more severe drop off from Sutjeska for the same reason.

"Decic became the best by default and because they are better organised than their direct competition."

Competition in the country has never been the strongest. No Montenegrin team ever breached the top three in the Yugoslav First League, let alone mounted a title challenge. "Historically, Montenegro didn't have much representation at a Yugoslav level in the Socialist era or even that much in the pre-independence period up to 2006," adds Wilson. "Only Buducnost, Zeta, Rudar Pljevlja and Sutjeska really distinguished themselves."

Being a small fish in a big pond had its challenges, but independence – Montenegro split from Serbia following a referendum in 2006 – has only seen a downward spiral for Montenegrin club football. UEFA's Association Ranking, based on each nation's teams' performances in recent campaigns, ranks the Montenegrin league 54th out of 55 member nations for the 2024-25 campaign, above only San Marino. Just nine years ago it sat 39th. The root of the decline, Wilson says, is financial.

"Zeta nearly went bust, Rudar were relegated last season having been almost bankrupt for years and Sutjeska are in a bit of trouble now too. As such, it's pretty easy to point to money being the issue.

"On top of that, though, you have 15 to 20 years of Serbian clubs doing their youth scouting in Montenegro, so the likes of Buducnost were behind the times straight away when it came to producing talent and having the infrastructure. The inevitable result is players being cashed in on early and clubs not getting adequate reward for their efforts, either monetarily or competitively because players are going too early from too low a standard and aren't able to cope."

Svetozar Janicic, a sports journalist based in Montenegro, agrees: "Anyone playing in

Montenegro is there because they aren't good enough to play elsewhere," he says. "Talented players move abroad very young and foreign players in the league don't offer any quality, they are there to collect a salary."

"Honestly, it's just about above Sunday League and I'm reasonably sure there are sides on Hackney Marshes [London's biggest amateur pitch] who would look competitive," continues Wilson on the league's standard. "It's a combination of agricultural play and often agricultural pitches but with some endemic issues – match-fixing is a problem.

"Dejan Savicevic, as FA head, does continually go on about cleaning the game up and, in his defence, does make an effort towards that," adds Wilson. "The problem is that there's so little money in the game and so many clubs with issues paying wages, that players are always going to be tempted if they're offered something to sway a game."

Improvements will take time but, in a corner of the world where fans are proud and passionate, patience is rare.

"The grassroots level would have to improve, from coaching to proper investments, looking long-term," says Serbian football journalist Nebojsa Markovic. "But in this region most people are looking towards the short-term, especially due to the financial situation. There is no patience for doing things the right, slower way – the way, say, Iceland has done with a population two times smaller than Montenegro's."

Manager...Milorad Pekovic watches on during the first leg against TNS

Iceland is a particularly relevant comparison: last season, Buducnost were thumped 5-0 away to Icelandic champions Breidablik in the preliminary round final of Champions League qualification.

This time, changes to the format meant the teams from the bottom 28-ranked nations entered the first qualification round, and Decic were drawn against Welsh champions The New Saints (TNS), a team well accustomed to European qualifiers. While they may have been pleased to avoid the likes of former European champions FCSB of Romania, perennial Bulgarian champions Ludogorets or Slovakia's Slovan Bratislava, this was a tough task for Decic.

In the build-up to the first leg, Decic unveiled a rebrand. Nicknamed the Blues for their traditional all-royal kit and blue-and-white badge featuring a red star, the club departed from their traditional colours after posting on

Agricultural... players warm up in the Podgorica City Stadium
Photo credit: Brian Jones/TNS FC

social media what appeared to be a new black and red club crest. In both legs, they wore red shirts with black shorts and socks.

The choice of colours is no coincidence. More than 50 per cent of Tuzi's population is ethnically Albanian, with the area formerly Albanian territory. The club's online posts are written in Albanian first, Montenegrin second, while Albanian flags are flown from the stands during matches. The first leg in Oswestry took place a fortnight after Albania's exit from Euro 2024, and the similarities in look to Sylvinho's side were neither subtle nor accidental. They were also not lost on the hundreds who left negative comments on the post, although Janicic insisted that most were from rival fans, and that generally the clash of identities brings little of the tension that exists with some other clubs in the region with similar duality.

Still, as a club that identify with the nation just over the border, and who play in a league where talent gets taken early by the bigger neighbour, TNS were fitting opponents for Decic. The record 16-time champions of the Cymru Premier play their home games in Oswestry, England, five miles from the Welsh border, and have done so since Welsh club Total Network Solutions (formerly Llansantffraid FC) merged in 2003 with Oswestry Town, who themselves played in the Welsh system.

Park Hall Stadium was the venue for the first leg, where Decic could hardly have made a worse start, unable to contend with a towering Brad Young header inside the opening minutes. Approaching the half-hour mark, the visitors had not learned their lesson, affording Young too much space inside the box as he planted another header home. There was still time for Danny Davies to bundle in a third before half-time, but no further goals in the second half gave Decic a sliver of hope.

> "Anyone playing in Montenegro is there because they aren't good enough to play elsewhere"
>
> Montenegrin sports journalist Svetozar Janicic

With the Stadion Tusko Polje in Tuzi falling short of UEFA criteria, the second leg was played at the Podgorica City Stadium. A turnaround was always going to be a tough ask, but at least Decic had conditions on their side: it was 36 degrees at kick-off despite the 9pm start and, although the stadium is the national team's home, the pitch was indeed agricultural, making the average Cymru Premier surface look like a bowling green.

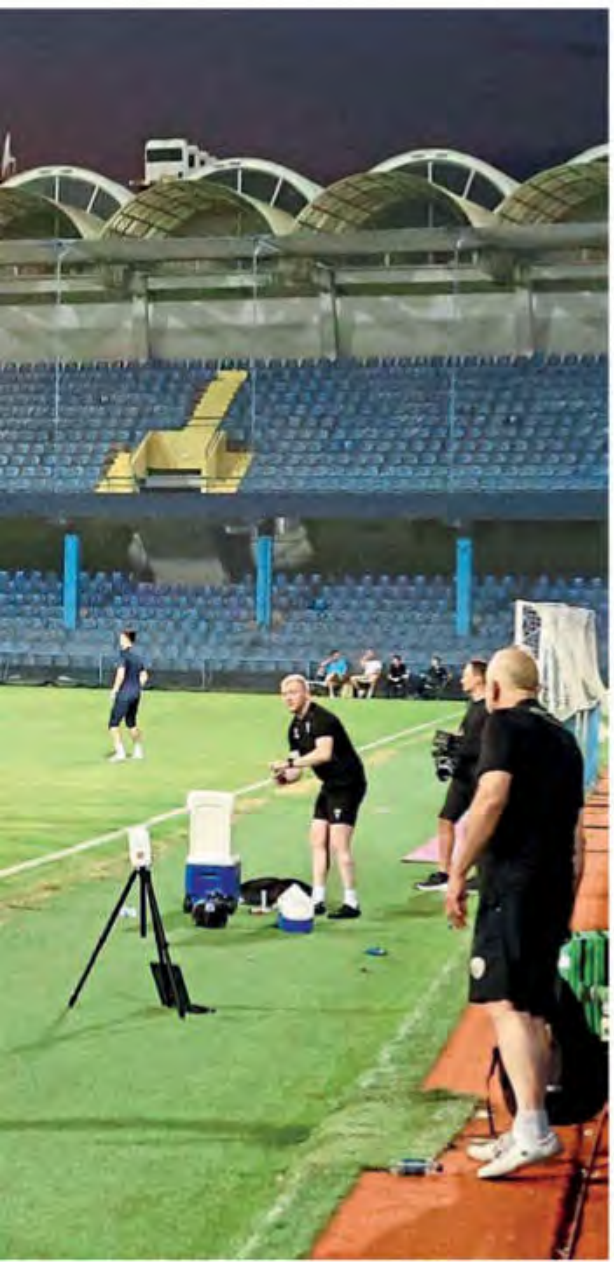
Not on their side, however, was luck – Alen Masovic saw his 25-yard strike hit the upright, and that looked to be the best chance of the first half until Brazilian Caique Chagas committed a foul inside his own area. Young sent the goalkeeper the wrong way from the penalty spot for his third goal of the tie, deflating any local aspirations of a comeback.

The 1,400-strong crowd, all penned into one stand, had something to cheer with 18 minutes remaining when VAR eventually confirmed Asmir Kajevic's strike crossed the line after cannoning down off the crossbar, but TNS ran out comprehensive 4-1 winners on aggregate, setting themselves up for a second round meeting with Hungary's Ferencvaros, as Decic dropped into UEFA Conference League qualification.

It may not be how Decic dreamt it, but with a maiden title ticked off and a new stadium on the horizon, they have reasons to cheer, as does Janicic: "Overall, this story is a positive one. Decic's title is good for Montenegrin football because it forces Buducnost and Sutjeska to improve."

In the Conference League first qualifying round, Buducnost beat Malisheva of Kosovo, while Mornar Bar caused a huge upset over Dinamo Tbilisi of Georgia. "It means for the first time, Montenegro will have three teams in the second round of a European competition," says Janicic, "It is a very small step, but a step in the right direction."

Where those steps lead for Decic, and Montenegrin football, remain to be seen.



Scrapping...Jonathan Dresaj (L) and Puleio (R) compete for the ball
Photo credit: Brian Jones/TNS FC

Hopes dashed...Brad Young's penalty ends Decic's hopes
Photo credit: Brian Jones/TNS FC

eyewitness

Bence Bocsak reports

SWEDEN

Brommapojkarna, Sweden's finest finishing school

Last season two headlines dominated Swedish football: international striker Viktor Gyokeres scoring 43 goals in 50 games for Portuguese champions Sporting, and midfielder Lucas Bergvall becoming the most expensive player in Allsvenskan history after completing a €10 million move to Tottenham Hotspur. Incidentally, both players came through the ranks of lesser-known club IF Brommapojkarna.

Situated in Stockholm, Brommapojkarna is not a juggernaut of Swedish football, far from it; the club only played in the top flight for the first time in 2007. It's not even one of Stockholm's top three most popular clubs, with AIK, Hammarby and Djurgardens dominating the local football scene. However, what Brommapojkarna is renowned for

is producing elite footballing talent.

Bergvall and Gyokeres are not the first talents to have come through the club's ranks. Many of Sweden's senior national team also trod the same path, including winger Dejan Kulusevski and defenders Hjalmar Ekdal, Carl Starfelt and Ludwig Augustinsson. The club has a long tradition of producing Sweden's best young talents dating as far back as the 1990s.

"It's not a recent happening, it's 30-40 years of tradition. It's one of the best academies in Sweden," says Dalibor Savic, who coached in Brommapojkarna's academy for several years and worked with the likes of Gyokeres. "It started in the 1990s. Brommapojkarna were the first club in Sweden who started to scout players and pick the best players from every age group. Now they've had over 30 years of experience of working with the best players."

Back in the early days, Brommapojkarna's first success story was when the club sold winger Bojan Djordjic to Manchester United in 1999. Nine years later, striker John Guidetti was sold to Manchester City. Since then, Brommapojkarna alumni have gone on to represent not just the Manchester clubs but Tottenham, Bayern Munich, Juventus, Chelsea, Sporting and Celtic, among many others.

"Everybody in Stockholm knows that Brommapojkarna has the best academy, so if you have a really talented kid who is eight years old, you take them directly to Brommapojkarna," The club's former sporting director, Peter Kisfaludy explains.

For Savic, one of the secrets behind Brommapojkarna's success has been to maintain not only its traditions and philosophy but also its personnel.

"It's so important that some of the people who were there in the 1990s are still working at the club today. They have a lot of competence and knowledge on how to scout and develop young players and that has helped to maintain Brommapojkarna's success for many years."

Brommapojkarna's personnel have also established a clear identity at the club. Kisfaludy, who was not only a sporting director but also a former academy graduate at Brommapojkarna, explains the club's key pillars: "We are looking for four blocks," he says. "Number one is the tactical box, which is about the playing intelligence like the scanning

Brommapojkarna graduates...(L to R) Viktor Gyokeres, Lucas Bergvall, Dejan Kulusevski and Ludwig Augustinsson

Current generation ...Brommapojkarna players celebrate scoring against Malmo
Photo credit: Erik Bjernulf/BPfotboll.se

and everything. Then there is the technical block where we work in the dribbling, the passing, the shooting and tackling. Everything we drill and drill.

"After that we have the mental block where we speak really positively about the benefits of learning. Everything needs to be really encouraging for the kids to create a strong mentality, but it's also important to have a tough mentality against our opponents.

"Lastly, it's the physical block. We need our players to be strong, fast and capable of running a lot – not only that, but also to have the balance and coordination – so we work a lot with gymnastics."

While all four blocks are important, Kisfaludy says Brommapojkarna places a special emphasis on the first two – especially at the beginning of a player's development.

"It doesn't matter how fast you are if you don't know how and when to run. It doesn't matter how technical you are if you don't know when to pass the ball. You need to be able to read the game so that's number one for us. So much has to do with the playing intelligence.

"You need to work on the playing intelligence and the technique from a young age. The first two blocks we start working on from eight years old. The other two we start as they get a little bit older and we start to concentrate on it more. You can see, Gyokeres, Kulusevski and Bergvall they are all top notch in the head."

As well as having those important pillars, Brommapojkarna tries to expose its players to different playing environments from a young age – which means they are constantly challenged and tested against some of the best players in the world in their age group.

> "Brommapojkarna have maybe only 1,000 people in the stands and that means they don't have the money to buy players. So, they need to sell players to make money and that's the DNA of the club"
>
> **Brommapojkarna's former sporting director, Peter Kisfaludy**

"The club is very competitive, we were always going to tournaments and winning a lot of competitions – not just in Sweden but abroad in different competitions in France, Germany and Italy," Savic says. "That means that from a young age the club's players are always competing against the top players from clubs like Paris Saint-Germain, Milan and so on, and the players can see that they are far ahead in their development as a young player already. Naturally it also means they get selected for the Sweden youth national teams and get even more experience in international games."

Brommapojkarna don't attract many spectators. In the last two seasons, average attendances have varied between 2,000 and 2,500 – which is one of the lowest in Sweden's top flight.

Given that the club is relatively small in size, even in comparison to other clubs in Stockholm, Brommapojkarna's philosophy is a means to survive. The club relies on producing young talent and then being able to sell them on for profit to be able to continue operating sustainably. As a result, there is a strong emphasis on getting the best young talents playing in the first team as soon as possible.

"There is a lot of focus on the academy; the Under-17s, the Under-19s, the second and the first team are all in the same place," explains the club's performance analyst, Marcus Bring. "The academy and the first-team staff share the same office spaces. If we can bring up an academy player, that's always the first choice. That's the

Former graduates ...Bojan Djordjic at Manchester United and John Guidetti at Manchester City

main objective for the club. That's the main part of our project."

Kisfaludy agrees: "Brommapojkarna is the fourth most popular club in Stockholm. They have maybe only 1,000 people in the stands and that means they don't have the money to buy players. So, they need to sell players to make money and that's the DNA of the club."

But there are ambitions to change that. Since their first top-flight season in 2007, the club has never had more than two consecutive seasons before they were relegated back to the second tier. In total, they have been promoted to the top tier on five separate occasions, most recently in 2022. They survived last season by thrashing Utsiktens 7-0 in the relegation-promotion play-off after finishing third from bottom in the league table.

By early August in the 2024 campaign they were ninth – six places and eight points above the drop zone. Bring believes they have a strong chance of finally ending the cycle of going down after two years.

"It has been very difficult to build a supporter base because for a long time it's mostly been about the academy.

"The goal of the marketing office has been to help the club grow and build more supporters. It's a difficult task but we are taking small steps all the time and I think if we can stay in the top flight that's something that will help us attract more supporters."

With Gyokeres, Bergvall and Kulusevski spreading the work of the club's academy worldwide, Brommapojkarna have definitely entered a new era in the club's history.

"I think the exposure of the club is quite high right now. We are talked about a lot. I think the club is gaining more recognition than ever. The club's name has come with a bit of respect but Gyokeres, Kulusevski and Bergvall have definitely increased the exposure," Bring adds.

"We are getting more scouts at our games and there has been quite a lot of interest to watch us from European sides."

Brommapojkarna's example leads the way in Sweden and Kisfaludy, who now works at Djurgardens having left the club in 2022, believes other clubs will soon follow suit.

"More clubs are starting to think that they are going to do the same thing as Brommapojkarna. Hammarby, Djurgardens and AIK are all trying to do the same thing and they have even taken some of the coaches from Brommapojkarna," he says.

Rather than being fazed by that prospect, Brommapojkarna will instead welcome the competition. The club has always had to be innovative to survive and they will continue to do so as they lead the way for the rest of Sweden. If others follow, that will only benefit Swedish football even further, and perhaps herald another golden generation for the Scandinavian country.

Modest fanbase ...the terracing at Brommapojkarna's Grimsta IP stadium

UP AND UP AND UP

The Ipswich Town manager has enjoyed one of the most rapid rises of any British or Irish coach this century. How much further can he go?

Words: Sean Cole

Dissatisfaction at a lost playing career has been the driving force behind Kieran McKenna's extraordinary progress as a coach and now manager. A promising midfielder forced to retire at 22 because of a hip injury, he was determined to reach the highest level in a different capacity.

Sixteen years on, McKenna has realised his dream with a resurgent Ipswich Town, leading them to consecutive promotions in swashbuckling style. He's revitalised the club with a brave and enterprising style of play, scoring the most goals in their division during his two full seasons in charge.

McKenna has always been a football obsessive. Born in London but raised in Fermanagh, Northern Ireland, he joined Tottenham Hotspur at 15. Although he was on the right track, representing Northern Ireland up to Under-21s level, injury took hold and wouldn't let go. He was devastated to finally admit defeat without registering a single first-team appearance.

Painful as that moment was, it only made McKenna even hungrier to have an impact on the professional game. He was encouraged to start coaching at Tottenham before going to Loughborough University to study sports science, broadening his horizons with placements at Leicester City, Nottingham Forest and Vancouver Whitecaps. McKenna returned to Spurs after graduation, eventually becoming their Under-18s manager.

"I just remember the sessions being brilliant – they flowed and there was intensity," recalls Dominic Ball, a midfielder who later reunited with McKenna at Ipswich. "He was still in the very early stages of his coaching. I've stayed in touch with him ever since."

McKenna quickly gained a reputation as a gifted coach with high standards. Warm and engaging by nature, his recent experiences of the academy system helped him relate to players at Tottenham.

His character, which combines a serious work ethic with a personal touch, has always stood out. "Very calm, very analytical, very detailed, but also very human," explains Ball. "He had that one-to-one relationship with every player. He seemed to really care for everyone. He would work such long hours, but he still made time for individual players, to have those conversations about family and what you're doing outside of football. It makes you want to fight for him."

In August 2016, McKenna was headhunted for a job he simply couldn't turn down. As a boyhood Manchester United fan, he was delighted to take charge of the club's Under-18s, leading a talented squad containing the likes of Teden Mengi, James Garner, Angel Gomes and Tahith Chong to the Premier League North title in his second season.

That success, allied to McKenna's tactical nous and player development skills, impressed Jose Mourinho, who promoted him to the first-team coaching staff as one of his assistants in a huge show of faith from a legendary manager. When Ole Gunnar Solskjaer replaced Mourinho later that year, McKenna was kept on and given even more responsibility, then was retained again by Ralf Rangnick.

But management was always the ultimate aim and, when Ipswich came calling, McKenna had felt ready to take that crucial next step for a while, turning down other approaches while waiting for the right opportunity. Ipswich felt like the ideal place to make his mark. Favourites for promotion from League One, they were adrift in mid-table when he was appointed in December 2021.

Ipswich took a calculated risk on an unproven McKenna. He was 35 at the time, still very young but certainly not inexperienced. He had 13 years of coaching behind him and instantly commanded the respect of a modest group of players for having worked with exceptional superstars such as Marcus Rashford, Paul Pogba and Cristiano Ronaldo.

In 2019, the Tractor Boys had been meekly relegated to the third tier for the first time in 62 years. Exasperated supporters wanted change. The club were languishing below their natural level when McKenna arrived but had been liberated by a £40 million takeover from American investment group Gamechanger 20.

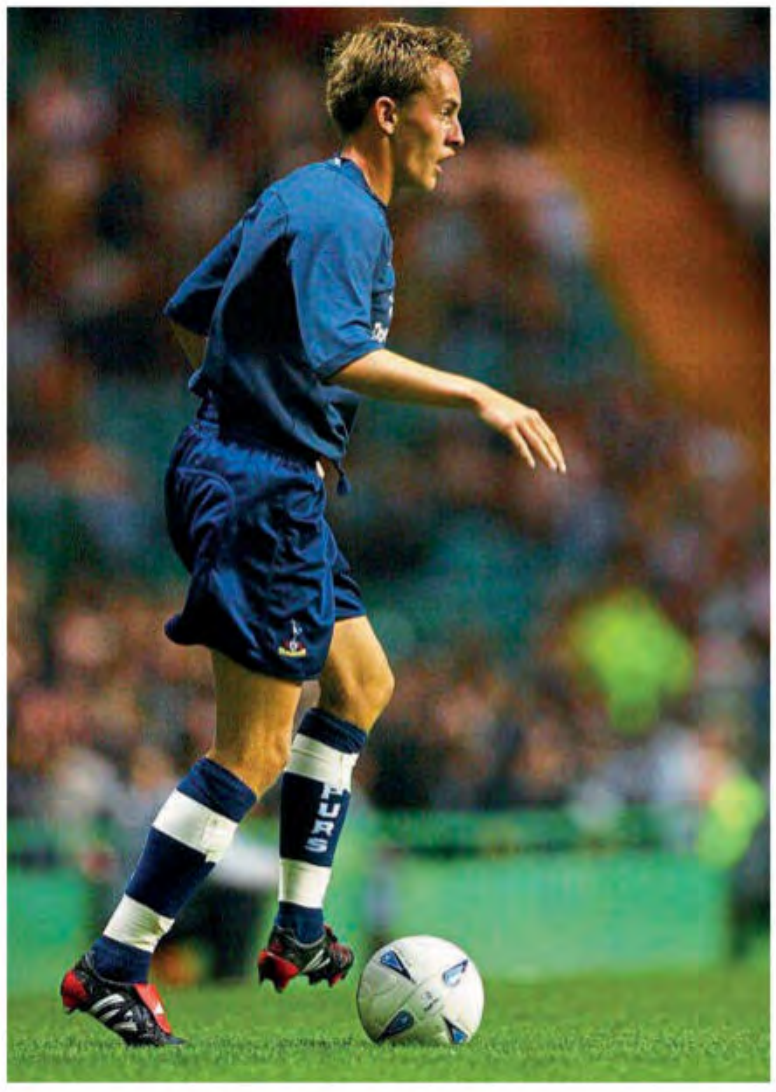
He made a positive start, closing the gap to the play-offs, and there was no sense of panic when they fell short. Although McKenna trimmed down a bloated squad, nine players still arrived that summer, including Ball, who trusted in the manager's vision.

While promotion from League One was expected given the size of the club and their financial backing, Ipswich progressed at remarkable speed. After an agonisingly slow decline, McKenna brought an immediate flood of optimism back to Portman Road. Crowds flocked to see winning football played in dynamic, entertaining fashion.

Over the last two seasons, Ipswich have been full of energy and intent. They typically press high up the pitch, looking to overwhelm opponents. It is a high-risk approach, where lack of effort or concentration can cause the whole system to fall apart. Through detailed video analysis and repetition on the training ground, McKenna has ensured that everyone understands their role and relishes working hard out of possession. The rewards for doing so have been obvious.

"Him and the coaches would spend hours watching games and preparing for sessions. Looking at the tiniest little details that made a massive difference," says Ball. "Every single drill we did was relevant to the game coming up. The players knew exactly what they were trying to do and how it should look because we'd worked so hard throughout the week.

"I think we were probably the fittest team in terms of running stats. But it was good running that actually helped us get through to the goal, and defensively as well. As a team, everyone defends. Everyone's connected and everyone works hard. If you didn't, you wouldn't be there for very long."



Dreams dashed... McKenna in a pre-season friendly for Tottenham in 2004

The top three – Plymouth Argyle, Sheffield Wednesday and Ipswich – set a relentless pace, driving each other on. The fight for automatic promotion was fiercely contested until the final day. McKenna's side ended with an 18-match unbeaten run, featuring just five draws, to take second spot with 98 points, the highest total in their history. They netted 101 goals in the process.

> McKenna was named LMA Manager of the Year, a rare winner from outside the top flight; Pep Guardiola and Jurgen Klopp had shared the previous four awards between them

The Championship posed a very different challenge. Some feared that Ipswich might get found out by clubs with bigger budgets and better individuals, but McKenna oversaw a seamless transition. They only lost six games all season, and never two in a row.

There were no real stars in the Tractor Boys squad. Most of them had limited Championship experience but still took the division by storm. Players like Wes Burns, Conor Chaplin, Sam Morsy, Cameron Burgess and Luke Woolfenden improved immeasurably. McKenna succeeded in building a team much greater than the sum of its parts. Their ceiling, individually and collectively, was raised beyond recognition.

Ball was part of the leadership group that set, and enforced, high standards. "We all knew that no one was bigger than the team or where we were trying to get to," he explains. "Every single day we had to bust our backsides. We had to push so that everyone could be successful. The main thing I learned was how you build a culture at a club and how teams should train and prepare."

Momentum was on Ipswich's side, fuelled by absolute faith in the manager's instructions. Some of their attacking play was breathtaking. With threats all over the pitch, goals were spread around the team. Amongst stiff competition, Burns' spectacular *trivela* from outside the box against Coventry City, which came at the end of a long, slick-passing move, was the pick of the bunch. A perfect illustration of McKenna's side at their purposeful best, it was deservedly named the EFL Goal of the Season.

Adaptability is one of McKenna's biggest strengths. He isn't an unwavering idealist committed to a single way of playing. When the situation demanded it, Ipswich proved equally as capable of patient build-up as sweeping, fast-paced attacks. Six teams averaged higher possession than their 53 per cent, and when it suited them the Tractor Boys would play direct to a physical yet quick presence up front, the focal point of their 4-2-3-1 formation.

If they had a defining quality, it was less in their tactical approach and more in their character. With the resilience and self-belief instilled by McKenna, combined with their high levels of fitness, Ipswich never knew when they were beaten and kept going until the

Old Trafford influence...McKenna in discussion with Michael Carrick and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer

Promotion secured... McKenna celebrates after guiding Ipswich Town back to the Premier League

final whistle. Last season, they scored 20 league goals in the 80th minute or later to help collect an extra 17 points. Most notably, having trailed 2-1 at home to Southampton, they scored an electrifying 97th-minute winner.

Ipswich faltered, picking up three points from the next four games, before back-to-back wins sealed an emotional return to the Premier League after 22 agonising years away. In recognition of that achievement, McKenna was named LMA Manager of the Year, a rare winner from outside the top flight; Pep Guardiola and Jurgen Klopp had shared the previous four awards between them.

At the end of May, McKenna agreed a new long-term contract designed to ward off interest from other clubs, including Chelsea and Manchester United. For now at least, he wants to see how much further he can take Ipswich. While mindful of the need to adapt, he has resolved to keep being bold and positive.

McKenna is already seen as a potential Ipswich great, in the lineage of their finest managers – Alf Ramsey, Bobby Robson and George Burley – but this season will pose by far the toughest test of his credentials. With an excellent track record, and a burning desire to prove himself on the biggest stage, it will be intriguing to see how he fares.

CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE

MAURICIO POCHETTINO
Tottenham's first-team manager while McKenna was the club's Under-18s coach. Pochettino's ability to forge genuine connections with his players, and the energetic, high-pressing football that they delivered, was a big source of inspiration for McKenna, who has sought to combine an affable, caring personality with real insight and focus in his work.

BRENDAN RODGERS
After breaking through as a young, progressive Northern Irish coach without a high-profile playing career to fall back on, the comparisons are obvious. Rodgers showed that it was possible for someone of McKenna's background to reach the top and stay there. They also both earned the respect, and patronage, of Jose Mourinho – another relative outsider in an insular profession – at key stages in their development.

SIR ALEX FERGUSON
McKenna's LMA Manager of the Year award was presented to him by Ferguson, who he cites as an inspiration. For a Manchester United supporter who followed his trophy-hoarding dynasty closely, this was a moment of huge validation. Ferguson found consistent success by varying his approach and being adaptable to football's prevailing trends. McKenna has already looked to do the same.

MICHAEL CARRICK
The pair formed a close bond while working as young coaches at Old Trafford, and spoke warmly of each other ahead of Ipswich's clash with Carrick's Middlesbrough side last season. Comparisons between the two are likely to be made if, as expected, Carrick builds on his early coaching promise by making it to the Premier League.

WorldSoccer

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ON SALE SEPTEMBER 27

SEASON PREVIEW

2024-25

CONTENTS

ENGLAND	44	ITALY	56
AUSTRIA	47	SCOTLAND	59
SPAIN	48	FRANCE	60
CROATIA	51	TURKEY	63
GERMANY	52	PORTUGAL	64
GREECE	55	NETHERLANDS	66

Arsenal ready to end City's dominance

The Gunners are capable of beating Manchester City in what is likely to be a two-horse race

"This Is Our Time". Arsenal's ambition is spelled out in large words in white on the red corridor wall by the home dressing-room at the Emirates. It really could be Arsenal's time for a first title since 2003-04, when the Invincibles reigned supreme and Bukayo Saka, incidentally, was just two years old.

This season's title race looks a two-horse contest, and Manchester City will be most people's choice. Any hopes that four consecutive titles will have dampened their appetite are fanciful; with Pep Guardiola they always have huge hunger. Where will the best performances come from? Erling Haaland and Jack Grealish are fully rested after enjoying the summer off; 21-year-old Norwegian Oscar Bobb could impress once he returns from a leg fracture; Mateo Kovacic is one of those underrated performers who goes slightly under the radar (crazy given he's won four Champions Leagues), but is much admired by his peers for the quality and intensity of his midfield work. Meanwhile, the progress of two exciting local talents, James McAtee, 21, and Nico O'Reilly, 19, will be closely followed.

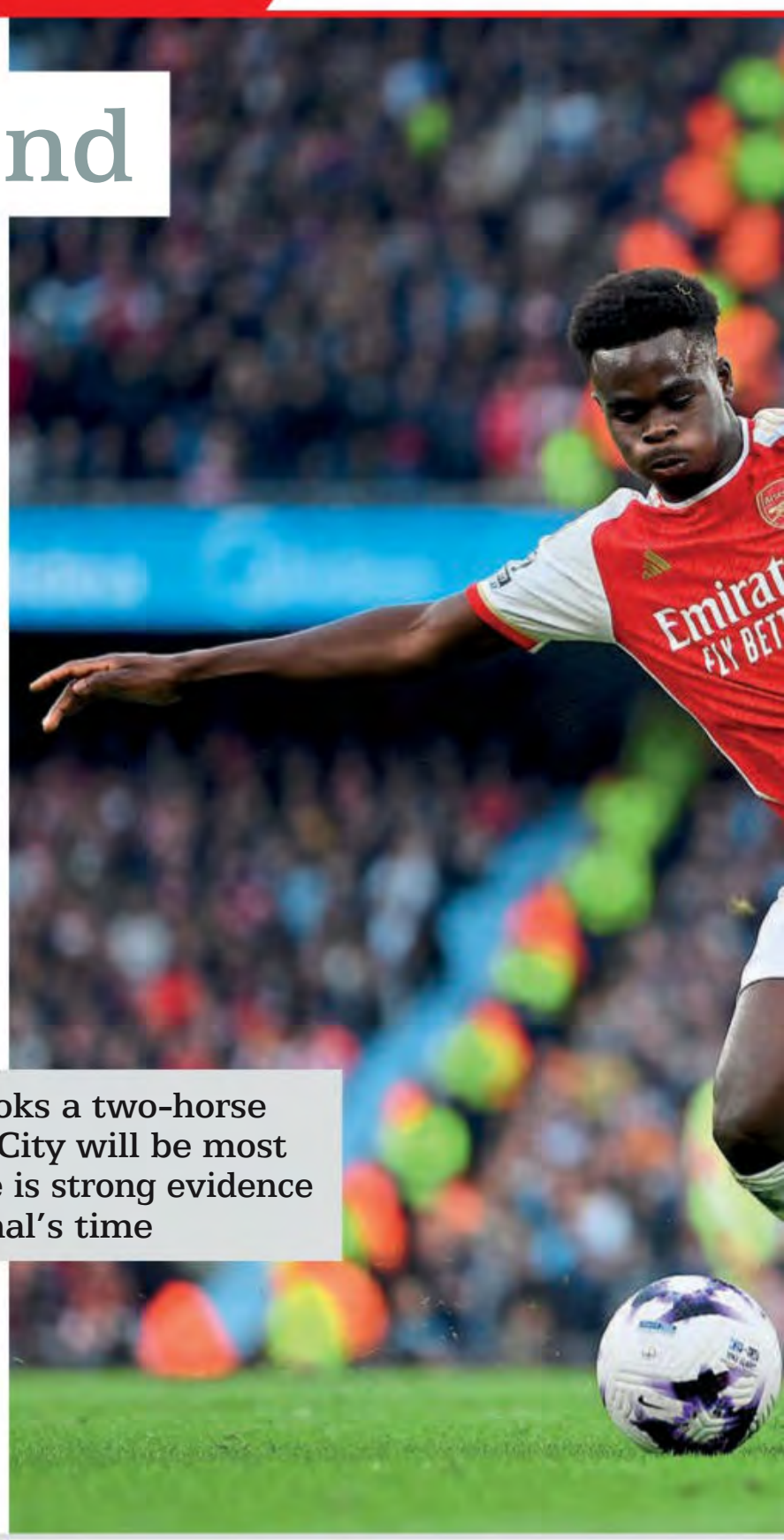
Off the field, the 115 charges of alleged financial breaches will be heard during the season. City, who strenuously deny all charges, will surely use the media focus and whatever the eventual verdict is as fuel for their fire.

Still, in spite of all that, there is strong evidence to believe it will be Arsenal's time. They pushed City so close last season, falling only two points short, and have taken lessons and more determination from the experience. Mikel Arteta has strengthened his side again. A defence that conceded only 29 goals last season looks even more formidable with the recruitment of the tall, imposing Italian Riccardo Calafiori arriving from Bologna for £42 million.

> This season's title race looks a two-horse contest, and Manchester City will be most people's choice…but there is strong evidence to believe it will be Arsenal's time

Eager supporters raid Eagles, Beach Boys and The Mamas & the Papas back-catalogues to find songs to rework as salutes. Welcome to the hothouse, Calafiori.

He sounds ready to meet expectations. He also sounds exactly what Arsenal

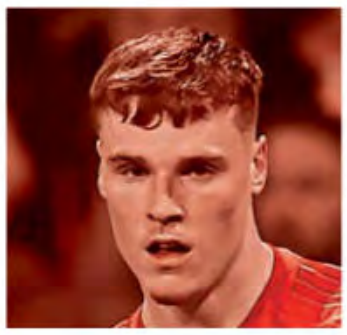


PLAYERS TO WATCH

JURRIEN TIMBER
(Arsenal)
Riccardo Calafiori's arrival might make Arsenal fans forget that they also signed a talented and versatile defender last summer too. After a debut campaign ruined by injury, Timber has a point to prove – and plenty of ability.

OLLIE WATKINS
(Aston Villa)
Was last season's league return of 19 goals and 13 assists a one-off, or part of Watkins' ascent to elite-level striker status? His semi-final goal at Euro 2024 suggests the latter; the Champions League gives him the chance to prove it.

COLE PALMER
(Chelsea)
Last season's impressive form was a pleasant surprise for Chelsea, but this term the expectation will be much greater. The pressure is on Palmer to get even better – something that, fortunately, doesn't seem to bother him at all.



JAKE O'BRIEN
(Everton)
Irishman O'Brien has taken an unlikely route to the Premier League, spending two years at Crystal Palace without playing a game before joining Lyon last year. Tall and aggressive, he is a classic Sean Dyche central defender.

RYAN SESSEGNON
(Fulham)
Back home at Fulham after failing to build on the impressive start to his career, which convinced Tottenham to pay £25m for the then-19-year-old in 2019. Still only 24, it is not too late for Sessegnon to unlock his potential.

Two-horse race? ...Arsenal and City will lock horns at the top of the table

Aiming for the title...Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta

need. He can play left-back or centre-back and affords Arteta that option to echo Guardiola's City and play a back four of centre-backs. Arteta can also rotate full-back and centre-back with Jurrien Timber, who will want to show his abilities after a first season wrecked by an ACL. Arsenal struggled at left-back last season, a problem that likely inhibited Gabriel Martinelli's influence further forward. Of course, Arsenal's creative prowess is much vaunted, and Saka will impress again if referees wake up and clamp down on opponents who target him. But their title hopes will be built on this bolstered defence.

Mid-September will test their mettle, bringing trips to Tottenham Hotspur and Manchester City either side of their first Champions League game. But never before have supporters at the Emirates been so unified and behind the team. In Arteta they trust. It's their time.

Henry Winter

CURTIS JONES
(Liverpool)
The talented 23-year-old midfielder may prove one of the main beneficiaries from Arne Slot's arrival at Anfield. "It's probably the happiest I've been in terms of a style of play that suits me," said Jones of his new coach's impact.

SAVINHO
(Manchester City)
An exciting young talent signed to bolster City's attacking ranks, or a cynical exploitation of the multi-club system? Whichever, the Brazilian winger was outstanding for Girona last season and could thrill in England.

JOSHUA ZIRKZEE
(Manchester United)
As the first signing of United's INEOS era, extra focus will be placed on how the young striker fares. His greatest impact, though, may be on others; he will be tasked with creating space for the likes of Rashford and Fernandes.

SANDRO TONALI
(Newcastle United)
Picked out last season as an exciting new signing to watch but things are now very different. The Italian will return from his ten-month betting suspension on August 28, when his form will come under intense scrutiny.

TAYLOR HARWOOD-BELLIS
(Southampton)
Over 50 England youth caps, captaining the U21s to last year's Euros victory, hints at rich potential, but this season will be his first taste of Premier League football. Signed for £20m from Manchester City after a successful loan spell.

Change at Anfield... Arne Slot with Dominik Szoboszlai

Injured...Manchester United's new £52m signing Leny Yoro has been ruled out for three months

SPOTLIGHT ON NEW COACHES

New faces and familiar faces all face up to pressure in the dugout. At Chelsea, Enzo Maresca cannot risk a poor start, or the fans' initial doubts will intensify around an inexperienced head coach. Maresca has plenty of talent to work with, including the nerve-free Cole Palmer, but should beware imposing his style of building slowly from the back and inverting full-backs on a squad built for other approaches.

Liverpool will miss the charisma and footballing smarts of Jurgen Klopp but Arne Slot will definitely be given plenty of time and the Kop's backing. He inherits a strong squad; any side with Virgil van Dijk and Mohamed Salah will be respected.

At Ipswich Town, Kieran McKenna will continue to win many admirers with his progressive football, and 20-year-old winger Omari Hutchinson will sparkle, but they may lack the strength in depth to stay up. Leicester City's Steve Cooper has the personality to give the Foxes a shot at survival but it will be tough, especially if they suffer a substantial points deduction after being charged for breaching Profit & Sustainability Rules.

Fabian Hurzeler will come under scrutiny because of his tender years, 31, but Brighton are known for their smart appointments. Meanwhile Julen Lopetegui has a point to prove at West Ham after his strange exit from Wolves last summer – though some interesting signings (Max Kilman, Crysencio Summerville, Niclas Fullkrug and Guido Rodriguez) bodes well for Hammers fans.

TESTING TIMES FOR TEN HAG

Many eyes will be on Manchester United as usual. They spent nearly £90m combined on defender Leny Yoro and attacker Joshua Zirkzee, young players who will develop and play important roles, but United will again be indebted to the homegrown talents, Kobbie Mainoo and Alejandro Garnacho. Mainoo could mature into United's key midfielder and Garnacho brings energy and a cutting edge out wide. United also need Marcus Rashford to focus and impose himself. The argumentative Bruno Fernandes is an awkward choice of captain, but he cares deeply about the club.

Manager Erik ten Hag will come under renewed pressure should United fail to hit the ground running. He could do with a relatively full squad to choose from – a rare luxury these days – and is due some respite from the injuries that have bedevilled the Red Devils. The arrival from Arsenal of Gary O'Driscoll as head of sports medicine and Jordan Reece as head physio shows the club's desire to confront their chronic injury woes. Give Ten Hag a fit Lisandro Martinez for the season and United should finish in the Champions League places.

ROSS'S RENAISSANCE

Expect a good season from Ross Barkley. He shone at Luton Town last season, driving forward with the ball as a number eight, contributing five goals and four assists in 32 games, and will see even more of the ball with Aston Villa. Barkley, 30, is free of injuries, happy and settled off the pitch. Villa have been organised and invigorated in equal measure by Unai Emery and Barkley will slot in smoothly. He loves a big stage and Villa Park offers him that.

THE RELENTLESS PREMIER LEAGUE

"Even more than before, this season will be the survival of the fittest," warns Erik ten Hag. Premier League fans want to see their players fit, fresh and on top form, not fatigued. Much focus will be on the likes of Arsenal's Declan Rice (66 games last season), Manchester City's Rodri (63) and all who spent so much of their summers on international duty to see if they struggle with injury or form on return to club combat. The Premier League endurance competition, the survival of the fittest, begins.

Henry Winter

WHO'S WHO?

ARSENAL
Manager: Mikel Arteta

ASTON VILLA
Manager: Unai Emery

BOURNEMOUTH
Manager: Andoni Iraola

BRENTFORD
Manager: Thomas Frank

BRIGHTON & HOVE ALBION
Manager: Fabian Hurzeler

CHELSEA
Manager: Enzo Maresca

CRYSTAL PALACE
Manager: Oliver Glasner

EVERTON
Manager: Sean Dyche

FULHAM
Manager: Marco Silva

IPSWICH TOWN
Manager: Kieran McKenna

LEICESTER CITY
Manager: Steve Cooper

LIVERPOOL
Manager: Arne Slot

MANCHESTER CITY
Manager: Pep Guardiola

MANCHESTER UNITED
Manager: Erik ten Hag

NEWCASTLE UNITED
Manager: Eddie Howe

NOTTINGHAM FOREST
Manager: Nuno Espirito Santo

SOUTHAMPTON
Manager: Russell Martin

TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR
Manager: Ange Postecoglou

WEST HAM UNITED
Manager: Julen Lopetegui

WOLVERHAMPTON WANDERERS
Manager: Gary O'Neil

Reinvigorated... Aston Villa new boy Ross Barkley

Another Sturm brewing?

Sturm Graz are hoping that lightning strikes twice after finally toppling Salzburg

Strum brewing...can Sturm Graz defend their league title?

Graz. Monday, May 20. One of the biggest celebrations the city had ever seen. An estimated 70,000 fans gathered en masse in front of the largest stage ever erected in the picturesque Hauptplatz to herald their heroes. Sturm Graz had done the unthinkable, dethroning Red Bull Salzburg as Austrian Bundesliga champions after a decade-long stranglehold and, for extra measure, had captured their second Austrian Cup in a row too; and Graz celebrated like there was no tomorrow.

Sporting director Andi Schicker and manager Christian Ilzer masterminded the downfall of a dynasty; the Red Bull domination of Austrian football had come to an end. Their arrival in 2020 – the COVID disrupted season where Sturm finished 31 points behind Salzburg – to becoming champions is a blueprint that clubs across Austria will look to emulate. Shrewd loan signings, excellent scouting, big-money departures, a mentality shift and a defined tactical system – it all came together for the perfect season. The question is, can it be repeated?

> Sturm Graz becoming champions is a blueprint that clubs across Austria will look to emulate

Three months on, Sturm aren't favourites for the title. Salzburg are. Under the new leadership of Pep Lijnders, better known as Jurgen Klopp's right-hand man at Liverpool, *Die Roten Bullen* will look to shake off last season's breakdown of their well-oiled machine. Matthias Jaissle's shock exit for Saudi Arabia on the eve of the season and the ill-fated appointment of Gerhard Struber left interim boss Onur Cinel to save the title streak – and he almost did. Nearly everything went wrong, and yet, Salzburg were only two points short of the title.

The two main contenders have kept the majority of their talents but, as usual, there have been some inevitable departures. Most notably for Sturm is Euro 2024 standout Alexander Prass who has joined Hoffenheim, while Salzburg shipped highly touted Serbian defender Strahinja Pavlovic to Milan and Croatian midfielder Luka Sucic to Real Sociedad. However, Sturm have strengthened, signing loan hero Mika Biereth permanently from Arsenal and Emanuel Aiwu from Cremonese, whilst most of Salzburg's army of young talents have – at the time of writing – remained, including Ivorian forward Karim Konate and Israeli playmaker Oscar Gloukh.

Still, such is the discrepancy of Austrian football finances, Sturm, who will play Champions League football for the first time since 2000-01, might need lightning to strike twice to unseat Salzburg again.

Beyond the top two, LASK and Rapid Vienna remain the likeliest challengers for the European spots. The Linzers have brought in German World Cup winner Jerome Boateng, and also secured the signature of Maximilian Entrup for €1.3 million, completing a meteoric rise for a player that, as recently as 2023, was playing for third-tier side Marchfeld Donauauen and studying to become a P.E. teacher. Last year he joined Hartberg and scored 13 goals in their surprise fifth-place finish, earning a spot in Austria's Euro 2024 squad and another move.

Rapid, a club perpetually stuck between a glorious past – an expectancy befitting the country's biggest fanbase – and an often faltering plan for the future, have seen prodigious centre-back Leopold Querfeld (Union Berlin) and star man Marco Grull (Werder Bremen) both head to Germany. Despite this, head coach Robert Klauss has shown potential since joining in November, which includes finally ending Rapid's hoodoos against Austria Vienna and Salzburg. A fruitful academy system and the return of popular playmaker Louis Schaub lean towards a bright season.

New Salzburg coach...Pep Lijnders was Jurgen Klopp's long-term assistant at Liverpool

Their Viennese rivals, Austria, seem distant from the top four. The internal appointment of Stephan Helm aims to upkeep a moderately successful philosophy, but another season hovering between fifth and eighth seems likely for a club still in deep financial trouble.

Elsewhere, one of the Carinthian duo of Austria Klagenfurt and Wolfsberger have reached the Championship Group in every season since the advent of the split (the league divides in half after 22 rounds) but never write off an underdog – as Hartberg demonstrated last term.

A long 17 years after an administration-forced relegation, and 12 years following their dissolution as a club, 2004 league champions Grazer AK are back in the top flight. The Red Devils have been to hell and back, reforming as a phoenix club and reborn in the eighth tier to play against, quite literally, village clubs. The club's precipitous rise saw six successive promotions, and then five years in the second division, but finally GAK are back. Their return means that for the first time since 1996-97, Austria's three most populous cities – Vienna, Graz and Linz – will all host Bundesliga derbies again.

Simon Clark

The Mbappe era begins

France superstar Kylian Mbappe is Real Madrid's biggest *Galactico* signing since Cristiano Ronaldo

New Barcelona boss... Hansi Flick is unveiled by Joan Laporta

Since signing Cristiano Ronaldo in 2009, Real Madrid have exceeded the Portuguese forward's €80 million transfer fee three times – Gareth Bale (2013), Eden Hazard (2019) and Jude Bellingham (2023) – yet none arrived in Madrid with the same combination of pedigree, potential and glamour as Kylian Mbappe.

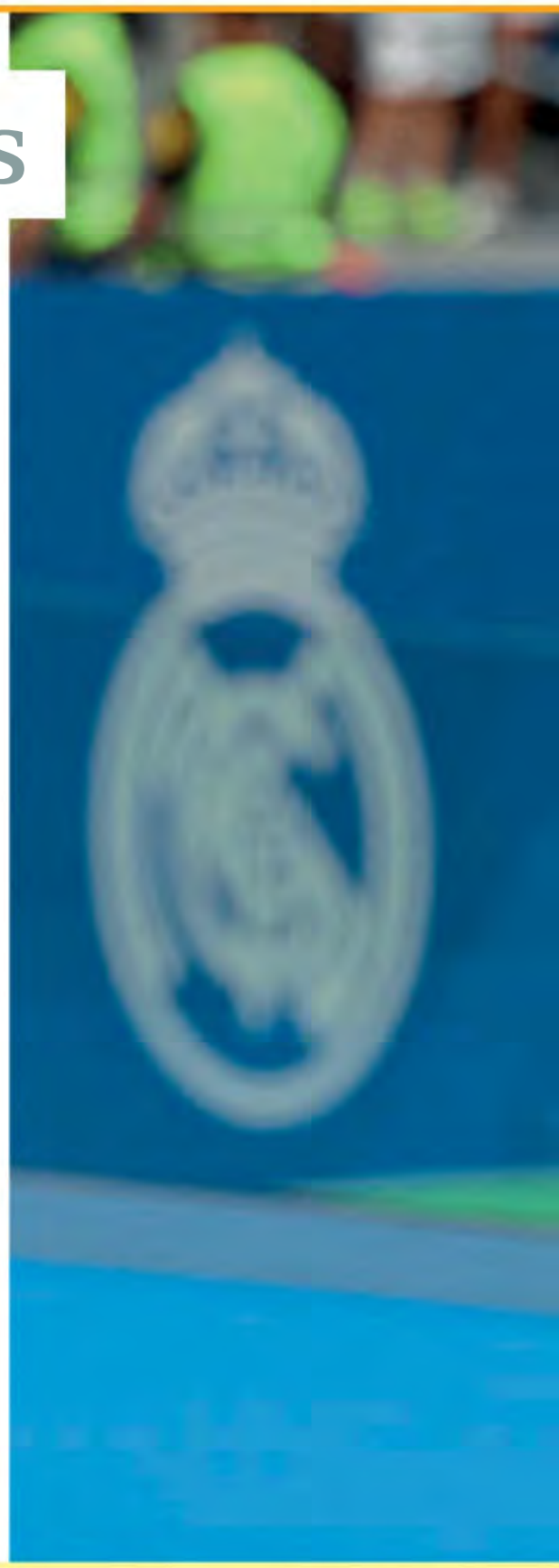
The France captain arrives as a six-time Ligue 1 champion, a World Cup winner with France, and Paris Saint-Germain's all-time record goalscorer. He has a strong case for being the world's best player and, at the age of 25, has the potential to get better. The only notable club trophy omitted from his CV, the Champions League, makes him even more of a perfect fit for Real, a club that has won the trophy four times since Mbappe made his professional debut in 2015.

And don't be fooled by the lack of transfer fee; the Spanish giants will pay the Frenchman a reported annual salary of €15m over five years, plus a signing-on fee close to €100m. This, in every sense, is a classic *Galactico* signing.

How he fits into *Los Blancos*' attack is a question for coach Carlo Ancelotti to answer, especially with the arrival of another headline-grabbing forward – Brazilian wonderkid Endrick. Since first agreeing to join Madrid in 2022, the teenage prodigy has fired Palmeiras to the 2023 Brazilian national championship, finishing as their top goalscorer in the process, and then netted his first goal for Brazil in March this year, becoming the youngest-ever male scorer at Wembley.

Madrid's summer business certainly sends a worrying message to their likeliest title rivals, Barcelona, who are adjusting to life under new coach Hansi Flick while continuing to function with precariously tightened purse strings.

Uber successful in the Bundesliga with Bayern Munich, the 59-year-old will heavily rely upon on youth – much like his predecessor Xavi, whom Flick must acknowledge for fast-tracking the progress of Lamine Yamal, Pau Cubarsi



PLAYERS TO WATCH

ALVARO DJALO
(Athletic Club)
Born in Madrid, of Bissau-Guinean descent, the versatile winger qualifies for Athletic after spending part of his youth in the Basque Country. He got eight goals and five assists in the Portuguese league for Braga last season.

PAU VICTOR
(Barcelona)
The 22-year-old winger joined from Girona last summer and impressed for Barcelona's B team in 2023-24. One of the club's standout stars in pre-season, notching a match-winning brace against Real Madrid in New Jersey.

IAGO ASPAS
(Celta Vigo)
Celta's all-time top goalscorer turned 37 in August and has just one year left on his current deal. It could be his final season in Spain, although reports suggest the club are open to offering him a "lifetime contract".

OLI McBURNIE
(Las Palmas)
The 28-year-old Scotland striker swapped Sheffield for the Canary Islands in one of the more eyebrow-raising summer signings. He was a free agent after his deal with the Blades, who were relegated from the Premier League, ended.

MATEU MOREY
(Mallorca)
The ex-*La Masia* attendee joined Borussia Dortmund back in 2019 but suffered a serious knee injury in 2021 that saw him sidelined for more than 1,000 days. The right-back, who is still only 24 years old, returned to Spain this summer.

and Fermin Lopez. The likes of right-back Hector Fort, and midfielders Pablo Torre, Marc Casado and Marc Bernal are tipped to be the next youngsters to step up to the first team.

Much will also be expected of another academy graduate, Dani Olmo, who returns to the club from RB Leipzig for €60m, ten years after leaving *La Masia* for Dinamo Zagreb. Still, given Barca's economic strife and abundance of forward players, it is a signing that will do little to ease supporters' concerns about the club's finances.

Elsewhere, Atletico Madrid will hope to challenge for the title for the first time since winning it in 2020-21. The signing of Premier League and World Cup-winning forward Julian Alvarez from Manchester City – a record sale for the English champions – for a fee potentially rising to €95m was their biggest transfer since Joao Felix from Benfica in 2019, and took their summer spending past €150m. Euro 2024-winning centre-back Robin Le Normand arrived from Real Sociedad to replace the released Mario Hermoso and Alexander Sorloth – last season's second top scorer in Spain – replaced Milan-bound Alvaro Morata.

Diego Simeone's reinvigorated side will fancy their chances of surpassing Barcelona in second spot but it would take a special season to overtake their city rivals, and this year's major favourites for the title, Real Madrid.

Jared Tinslay

The Spanish giants will pay Mbappe a reported annual salary of €15m over five years, plus a signing-on fee close to €100m. This, in every sense, is a classic *Galactico* signing

A new era...Mbappe is unveiled to the Santiago Bernabeu

ISCO
(Real Betis)
Rewarded with a contract extension until 2027 due to his spectacular start to the campaign last season, Isco ended 2023-24 with double figures for league goals and assists combined. The 32-year-old is still a joy to watch on the ball.

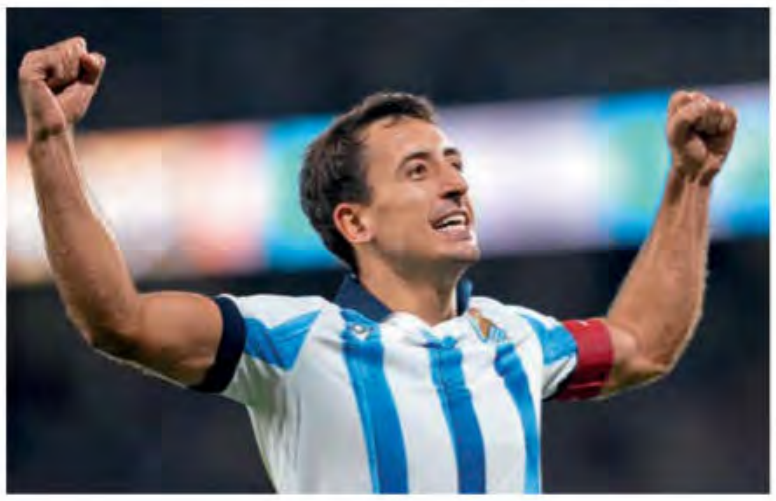
JUDE BELLINGHAM
(Real Madrid)
Last season's La Liga Player of the Year has set incredibly high standards for himself going into his second season in Spain. It will be fascinating to see how Ancelotti deploys him in the attacking set-up alongside Mbappe.

SERGIO GOMEZ
(Real Sociedad)
The attacking-midfielder-turned-left-back returns to Spain after struggling for first-team opportunities at Manchester City. The English champions have reportedly included a 30 per cent sell-on clause in the deal.

KELECHI IHEANACHO
(Sevilla)
Replacing last season's top goalscorer Youssef En-Nesyri, who exited for Fenerbahce, the 27-year-old former Leicester City striker becomes the club's second-ever Nigerian after winger Chidera Ejuke joined earlier in June.

ALEX BAENA
(Villarreal)
Playing as the left-midfielder in Villarreal's 4-4-2 system last season, Baena registered 14 La Liga assists – more than any other player – and earned a call-up to Spain's successful Euro and Olympic squads.

Basque brothers ...Nico and Inaki Williams at Bilbao


Key man...Real Sociedad forward Mikel Oyarzabal

GIRONA'S SECOND SEASON SYNDROME

Realistically, the chances of Girona repeating last season's third-place finish are slim. As well as juggling their first-ever season in the Champions League, they will have to do so without a number of the key men who actually helped achieve European football for the club. Loanees Eric Garcia, Savinho, Yan Couto and Pablo Torre have all gone, while club captain Aleix Garcia (sold to Bayer Leverkusen for €18m) and last season's league top scorer Artem Dobvyk (Roma for €30.5m) also left. In to replace them came Premier League misfits Bryan Gil, Donny van de Beek and Oriol Romeu, plus highly rated but unproven players like Alejandro Frances, Ladislav Krejci and Abel Ruiz. A top-six spot would be considered a success for the Catalans this campaign.

BASQUE AMBITION

If Girona do leave a vacancy in the top four, then Athletic Club and Real Sociedad should be ready to pounce. The former finished 2023-24 particularly strongly, losing only a handful of league games from November onwards to finish fifth and winning the Copa del Rey. With Euro 2024 superstar Nico Williams seemingly set to stay, they should be both entertaining and effective.

Bilbao finished one place above their Basque Country rivals Real Sociedad, who have been dealt a huge blow with Robin Le Normand's exit. There's still an abundance of talent in their squad though, not least Mikel Oyarzabal, who scored the winner in the Euro 2024 final, and midfielder Martin Zubimendi, who rejected Liverpool's advances.

ESPANYO-YOL

Relegation from La Liga in 2019-20 ended a 26-year stay in the top flight for Espanyol and, although they bounced back at the first time of asking, they were relegated again in 2022-23. They clinched promotion via the play-offs last season, but appear in danger of becoming one of Spanish football's yo-yo clubs.

Not only has coach Manolo Gonzalez never managed in the top flight, he has only 12 second-tier games under his belt (plus four in the play-offs) having been appointed in March of this year. The 45-year-old will also be without last season's top scorer Martin Braithwaite after the Denmark striker executed his release clause in order to join Gremio in Brazil, while playmaker Nico Melamed – once a target of Chelsea, Real Madrid, and Barcelona – has opted to stay in the second tier, joining Almeria. At the time of writing, only full-backs Carlos Romero (Villarreal, loan) and Alvaro Tejero (Eibar, free) have arrived, meaning that this is essentially the same squad that finished fourth in the Segunda last season minus two of its prominent attackers.

BARCA'S CAMP NOU RETURN

Barcelona played last season's home games at the city's Olympic Stadium due to renovations to the Camp Nou, and club representatives have targeted a return date of December 22 for the scheduled clash with Atletico Madrid. Initially, 64,000 spectators will be allowed in the first and second tiers, while work continues on the third tier structure and roof until August 2025. The VIP lounges will be open by the beginning of 2025-26, with the goal to have the ground fully operational by June 2026.

Jared Tinslay

Under construction ...the Camp Nou in August 2023

WHO'S WHO?

ALAVES
Manager: Luis Garcia

ATHLETIC CLUB
Manager: Ernesto Valverde

ATLETICO MADRID
Manager: Diego Simeone

BARCELONA
Manager: Hansi Flick

CELTA VIGO
Manager: Claudio Giraldez

ESPANYOL
Manager: Manolo Gonzalez

GETAFE
Manager: Jose Bordalas

GIRONA
Manager: Michel

LAS PALMAS
Manager: Luis Carrion

LEGANES
Manager: Borja Jimenez

MALLORCA
Manager: Jagoba Arrasate

OSASUNA
Manager: Vicente Moreno

RAYO VALLECANO
Manager: Inigo Perez

REAL BETIS
Manager: Manuel Pellegrini

REAL MADRID
Manager: Carlo Ancelotti

REAL SOCIEDAD
Manager: Imanol Alguacil

REAL VALLADOLID
Manager: Paulo Pezzolano

SEVILLA
Manager: Garcia Pimienta

VALENCIA
Manager: Ruben Baraja

VILLARREAL
Manager: Marcelino

More big names touch down in Split

Another injection of high-profile arrivals give Hajduk hope of ending Dinamo Zagreb's dominance

High-profile arrival... new Hajduk coach Gennaro Gattuso

"Can't start a fire without a spark," said the great Bruce Springsteen. Well, in Split, that one spark is always somewhere near, ready to engulf the ever-ready Hajduk no matter how much battering they keep on taking.

A mere month and a half after a disastrous ending to a high-expectation season, which saw the club drop from first to third place, Hajduk reignited high hopes by introducing two former Champions League-winning midfielders – one in the dugout and another in the centre of the pitch. Italian head coach Gennaro Gattuso and former Croatia superstar Ivan Rakitic are the latest big names to arrive on the Adriatic coast, tasked with finally ending the 20-year wait for a league title.

After Gattuso was unveiled as the new manager, his first move was to convince the iconic former Barcelona and Sevilla midfielder, who also led Croatia to the 2018 World Cup final, to prematurely end his short spell in Saudi Arabia with Al Shabab and join the Croatian side in what is likely to be one last major challenge in his great career. He joins fellow national team veterans – striker Marko Livaja, keeper Lovre Kalinic and, as sporting director, Nikola Kalinic – at the club.

However, big names don't count for much if things don't click on the pitch, as the aforementioned collapse in the second half of last season aptly demonstrated. It was Rijeka who took pole position for the majority of the spring, with a vastly different line-up to Hajduk's. Leaning mostly on unproven young players alongside a couple of experienced returnees to Croatia – including Marko Pjaca, once of Juventus – they pushed on both domestic fronts all the way to the finish line, yet ultimately finished as runners-up in both the league and the cup.

> Hajduk reignited high hopes by introducing two former Champions League-winning midfielders

Instead it was Dinamo Zagreb, lurking from the shadows in an otherwise very unconvincing season for them. All they had to do was watch and wait for their rivals to trip over their own legs, stepping over them to grab a league-cup double. That also means they've extended their run to seven consecutive championship titles in a row, as well as ending Hajduk's run of wins in the Croatian Cup at two.

A similar dynamic is expected for this season. Hajduk lost Josip Brekalo, another big winter signing who opted not to continue his loan from Fiorentina, but Rakitic is a more than suitable replacement – and he may not be the last big-name arrival this summer. The Croatian transfer window closes on September 5 and Hajduk have been linked with a move for Bosnia & Herzegovina striker Edin Dzeko, although prising him away from Fenerbahce may prove impossible.

Still, Hajduk can also rely on talented youngsters to complement the experience they have, including 20-year-old midfielder Rokas Pukstas, a member of USA's pre-Olympic training squad. With Gattuso's discipline and winning mentality, another title push will be expected.

That winning mentality has been present at Dinamo Zagreb for a while, and it is that which helps them get over the line when it matters most – just like last season. They will also hope to take that approach into Europe – preferably the lucrative new Champions League format, but at least the Europa League – which will, in turn, benefit the rest of the domestic league.

Rijeka, champions for the first and only time in 2016-17, will again be dreaming of upsetting the odds. So too will Osijek, led by last season's top scorer Ramon Mierez who bagged 18 goals for the fourth-placed team.

Big names, big stories; Croatia's top flight will once again be the hipster's choice looking for an exciting European league to follow in 2024-25.

Juraj Vrdoljak

Champions...Dinamo Zagreb parade last season's league title

'Genius' Alonso makes Leverkusen the team to beat

Bayern Munich want to regain the Bundesliga title, but they have a lot of ground to make up on last season's invincible champions

PLAYERS TO WATCH

ERMEDIN DEMIROVIC
(Stuttgart)
The Hamburg-born Bosnia international, 26, excelled for Augsburg last season as a deep-lying forward, the perfect link between midfield and attack. The Reds have just invested €21m in his creativity, goals and mobility.

ALEIX GARCIA
(Bayer Leverkusen)
Outstanding Spanish midfield tempo-setter and strategist, who swapped Girona this summer for the Rhineland. A key figure in Girona's Champions League qualification last season, he can operate in central defence too.

JONATHAN BURKARDT
(Mainz)
After 12 months out with a complicated knee problem, the ex-Germany Under-21 captain roared back to life in 2024. The forward was a real go-to performer and inspirational anti-relegation figurehead, scoring eight goals in 21 games.

SERHOU GUIRASSY
(Borussia Dortmund)
Fresh from contributing 28 goals to Stuttgart's stunning silver medal in the Bundesliga last term, the Guinea striker recently secured a €17.5m switch to the Westfalenstadion. Missed the start of the season with a knee injury.

ROBIN HACK
(B. Monchengladbach)
A memorable hat-trick in a 4-3 springtime loss at his old club Hoffenheim was a typical masterclass from the roving left-winger, whose stock in trade is his ever-reliable finishing and elusiveness in one-on-one situations.

Bayern Munich usually can be relied upon to swiftly take flight again after plummeting from their perch. Seven out of eight times since 1996, the Bavarians have reacted to a rare Bundesliga wipeout by immediately re-establishing themselves on top of the pile. Like a cornered animal, Bayern are sure to come out growling in 2024-25. But will it be enough to see off reigning champions Bayer Leverkusen, the new number one force in the country?

Leverkusen, who last season became the first-ever team to remain undefeated in a Bundesliga campaign, did not merely unseat Bayern; Xabi Alonso's plucky side obliterated the behemoth from the south, finishing 18 points and two places ahead. A lot of psychological damage was done at all levels in the Bayern ranks and despite a new coach (Vincent Kompany) and several strong additions to the squad – not least Portugal defensive midfielder Joao Palhinha (Fulham), French winger Michael Olise (Crystal Palace) and Japan defender Hiroki Ito (Stuttgart) – they arguably have too much ground to make up. Prolific marksman Harry Kane and brilliant attacking midfielder Jamal Musiala cannot carry the load alone.

Work to do...Bayern Munich must improve on last season to catch Bayer Leverkusen

> Only in terms of financial power does the current iteration of Bayern outscore their Leverkusen counterparts

Only in terms of financial power does the current iteration of Bayern outscore their Leverkusen counterparts. In so many other categories, it is the Rhinelander who lead the dance: more close-knit as a squad, greater tactical flexibility, and better in the recruitment, medical and analytical departments.

It's also abundantly apparent that the *Werkself* have the most influential coach in Xabi Alonso. What he achieved last season in his first full campaign in charge of a pro team – a German league and cup double, Europa League runners-up and an epic 51-game unbeaten streak – was nothing short of otherworldly. With the ever-hungry Basque in charge, Leverkusen are most unlikely to succumb to complacency in the months ahead.

Their recipe for success will continue to be based on the fluidity and interchanging of positions in the attacking-third, the brutal efficiency with which they press the ball high up the pitch and their never-say-die attitude. But also expect a regular diet of inspired Alonso chess moves, such as the innovations which underpinned the 3-0 defeat of Bayern in February: the absence of a genuine striker and a back-line made up of four central defenders.

A magician in rotating his personnel, Alonso will have even more first-rate options now that Spanish defensive midfielder Aleix Garcia and versatile French frontrunner Martin Terrier have been added to the BayArena mix.

Nick Bidwell

JACKSON IRVINE
(St Pauli)
No current St Pauli player better exemplifies the spirit of the newly-promoted Hamburg side than their 31-year-old Australian midfielder and skipper. Full of running and commitment, and often pops up with vital goals for his club.

HIROKI ITO
(Bayern Munich)
As the only natural left-footer in Bayern's central defensive roster, the Japan international, who can also play at left-back, will have an important part to play for the Bavarians this term. Signed from Stuttgart in July for €23.2m.

PATRICK MAINKA
(Heidenheim)
The ex-Arminia Bielefeld, Borussia Dortmund and Werder Bremen centre-back, 29, has improved year on year since joining Heidenheim back in 2018. Captain Courageous, a born defensive competitor, resilient and authoritative.

BENJAMIN SESKO
(RB Leipzig)
Despite an up-and-down Euro 2024 leading the line for Slovenia, the young gun striker remains a prospect of the highest order, a thrilling blend of pace, intelligence, power and technique. Recently signed a new contract with RB.

MICHAEL ZETTERER
(Werder Bremen)
Somewhat late-developing 29-year-old goalkeeper, who consistently earned top marks after supplanting then-Werder Bremen No.1 Jiri Pavlenka early last term. Great reactions, and very comfortable on the ball and in distribution.

RELEGATION WORRIES

Union Berlin, who in the first half of last season were abysmal and only survived thanks to a stoppage-time winner in their final fixture, may not be so lucky this time around. New coach Bo Svensson needs to make them less one-dimensional and a good start would be to cut out the excessive use of long hopeful punts up field. Heidenheim, who in their first season in the top flight exceeded all expectations by coming eighth, could be in trouble after their highly productive front-line duo of Tim Kleindienst and Jan-Niklas Beste moved on this summer to Borussia Monchengladbach and Benfica respectively. Gladbach, who finished 14th last season will need their new recruit to impress; only one team gained fewer Bundesliga points than them in last season's Spring Championship, and their leaky back-line is a major concern.

ALL CHANGE AT FREIBURG

After 12 years in charge of the pros at the Black Forest outfit, and almost three decades serving the club in all coaching capacities, Christian Streich has called it a day, not only leaving a tremendous legacy at this progressive, well-run organisation, but also bequeathing huge shoes for his successor Julian Schuster to fill. A former Freiburg captain who played almost 250 games for the club before working in the academy, Schuster says he wants the side to press higher and be sharper in attacking transitions. New winger Eren Dinkci, bought from Werder Bremen, should aid the quest for more spectacle and unpredictability.

BAYERN'S LENGTHY COACH CHASE

The Bavarians' appointment of Vincent Kompany from Burnley to replace former coach Thomas Tuchel was a complicated, scattergun process, beginning with Xabi Alonso's not unexpected decision to remain with Leverkusen and involving a seemingly never-ending succession of abortive candidacies. Former Bayern coaches Julian Nagelsmann and Hansi Flick, Manchester United boss Erik ten Hag and Crystal Palace's Oliver Glasner were all reportedly in the frame at one point or another, while negotiations with Austria coach Ralf Rangnick appeared to be going well, only for the former RB Leipzig and Manchester United boss to have a change of heart. It was an undignified ordeal for all – perhaps a panicky consequence of Bayern's first Bundesliga title race collapse since 2012 – particularly as the first head coach appointment by new sporting director Christoph Freund.

DORTMUND UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT

An in-house appointment after predecessor Edin Terzic surprisingly quit at the end of last season, Nuri Sahin, a former classy Dortmund playmaker, must find a solution to the *Schwarz-Gelben's* chronic inconsistency. For all the excitement of reaching the Champions League final, the Ruhr giants were lucky to even finish fifth in the Bundesliga in 2023-24, often losing focus and failing to break down packed opposition defences. As well as adding panache and boldness to their attacking play, Sahin will also be expected to use more youngsters; the average age of the side has been creeping up over the last four seasons (26.8 years last term), an unwelcome trend for a club with a reputation for its faith in youth.

Nick Bidwell

Relegation concerns...Union Berlin finished the last campaign unconvincingly

New Bayern coach... Vincent Kompany

In the hot seat... Dortmund's new boss Nuri Sahin

WHO'S WHO?

AUGSBURG
Manager: Jess Thorup

BAYER LEVERKUSEN
Manager: Xabi Alonso

BAYERN MUNICH
Manager: Vincent Kompany

BOCHUM
Manager: Peter Zeidler

BORUSSIA DORTMUND
Manager: Nuri Sahin

BORUSSIA MONCHENGLADBACH
Manager: Gerardo Seoane

EINTRACHT FRANKFURT
Manager: Dino Toppmoller

FREIBURG
Manager: Julian Schuster

HEIDENHEIM
Manager: Frank Schmidt

HOFFENHEIM
Manager: Pellegrino Matarazzo

HOLSTEIN KIEL
Manager: Marcel Rapp

MAINZ
Manager: Bo Henriksen

RB LEIPZIG
Manager: Marco Rose

ST PAULI
Manager: Alexander Blessin

STUTTGART
Manager: Sebastian Hoeness

UNION BERLIN
Manager: Bo Svensson

WERDER BREMEN
Manager: Ole Werner

WOLFSBURG
Manager: Ralph Hasenhuttl

Set for another Greek classic?

Off the back of a landmark campaign for Greek football, there is plenty of excitement ahead of the new season

PAOK v Olympiacos ...the reigning Greek champions and UEFA Conference League winners clash

Fans of Greek football can only hope that the new Super League campaign is as competitive and dramatic as it was in 2023-24. All those irked by Olympiacos' one-club rule over the last three decades – champions on no fewer than 22 occasions since 1997 – would have loved the almost surreal events of last season: the top four clubs separated by just four points in the regular championship and the compelling excitement of the play-offs, where Salonika's PAOK snatched the title away from Athenian giants AEK in sensational fashion, beating all their main rivals (AEK, Olympiacos, Panathinaikos and Salonika rivals Aris) in their final four fixtures.

History says that PAOK will find it very difficult to claim back-to-back crowns. They have only achieved four national titles in their entire history and the last time they had to defend the Super League, in 2019-20, they ended up second, trailing champions Olympiacos by an enormous 18 points.

> History says that PAOK will find it very difficult to claim back-to-back crowns

Not that the PAOK Class of 2024-25 will be scouring the record books for excuses. Their Romanian coach Razvan Lucescu has instilled in the squad a voracious will-to-win and mental toughness, a marked reluctance to never accept their fate. Well-drilled and tactically disciplined, PAOK also boast a number of excellent individuals, notably Brazilian left-winger Taison, Bulgarian winger Kiril Despodov, the hugely-talented 21-year-old attacking midfielder Giannis Konstantelias, and 20-year-old centre-back Konstantinos Koulierakis – the latter two of whom are already senior Greek internationals.

New faces in the PAOK ranks include Russia striker Fyodor Chalov (formerly of CSKA Moscow) Morocco striker Tarik Tissoudali (Gent), Guinea midfielder Mady Camara (Olympiacos) and Poland international central defender Tomasz Kedziora (Dynamo Kyiv).

AEK, immensely frustrated that their bid for a second consecutive Super League title came unstitched at the death, find themselves at the dawn of a new era. Long-standing owner Dimitris Melissanidis sold the club this summer to fellow shipping magnate Marios Iliopoulos, who immediately set out his stall at his presentation. "I will give my soul, my mind, my whole being to conquer titles."

Only time will tell whether Iliopoulos will be able to live up to the ambitious rhetoric. New signings such as the Argentine pairing of winger Erik Lamela (ex-Sevilla) and midfielder Roberto Pereyra (Udinese) plus Albania keeper Thomas Strakosha (Brentford) are all somewhat long in the tooth, while AEK will most definitely miss the finishing depth provided by Argentine front-man Ezequiel Ponce, who moved to Houston Dynamo in MLS for €9 million. Last term Ponce was mainly used as an impact player by coach Matias Almeyda, but piled up the goals in the second half of the season. His replacement Aboubakary Koita, a €4m signing from Sint-Truidense, has big boots to fill.

Hugely talented ...PAOK midfielder Giannis Konstantelias

Olympiacos, who thanks to their triumph in the Conference League last season are now the only Greek club ever to win a continental trophy, will be aiming to translate those heady European nights to the domestic front. In Europe last term they only had to raise their game in nine matches, but a long Super League haul is another matter altogether – as they discovered with last season's third-place finish. In winger Georgios Masouras, striker Ayoub El Kaabi and midfield enforcer Santiago Hezze, the Piraeus club have a trio of genuine aces, but their class might be spread too thinly.

Without a league title since 2010, the other big Athenian outfit, Panathinaikos, have a new coach in the Uruguayan Diego Alonso. The ex-Sevilla boss has so far made some interesting signings such as Greece right-back George Baldock (Sheffield United), left-back Philipp Max (Eintracht Frankfurt) and Brazilian winger Tete (Galatasaray).

Elsewhere in the capital city, Athens Kallithea are back in the Greek top flight for the first time in 18 years. A small suburban club with an abundance of progressive ideas regarding team-building and financial stewardship, they have just appointed the former Milan, Atalanta and Celtic midfielder Massimo Donati as their new head coach.

Nick Bidwell

Serie A the best in class

The Italian top flight is out to justify its status as the best in Europe according to last year's UEFA coefficients

PLAYERS TO WATCH

NICOLO ZANIOLO
(Atalanta)
Once considered one of the great "promises" of Italian football, the talented Zaniolo gets a chance to put his career back on track in Bergamo after injury-interrupted sojourns with Aston Villa and Galatasaray.

MEHDI TAREMI
(Internazionale)
Thanks to the expected heavy fixture list in this new-look campaign, the vastly experienced Taremi – capped 85 times by Iran (scoring 50 goals) including appearances at the last two World Cups – may find some space with busy Inter.

PIOTR ZIELINSKI
(Internazionale)
In the brave new era of 70-plus games per season, fellow new signing Zielinski will also prove an important addition to the reigning Italian champions' squad. The Poland stalwart only missed one game in Napoli's 2022-23 *Scudetto*.

ARTEM DOVBYK
(Roma)
Bought from Spanish club Girona for a reported €38m after topping last season's La Liga scoring charts with 24 goals. According to reports, the Ukrainian was so keen to join Roma that he waived a €1.5m bonus due to him from Girona.

ALESSANDRO BUONGIORNO
(Napoli)
Heralded as one of the best Italian centre-backs in the league last season, Buongiorno was picked by the *Azzurri* for Euro 2024 but failed to play a single minute. After a €35m move from Torino, he'll want to prove any doubters wrong.

Title holders... Inter dominated last season

When the new Serie A season kicked off in mid-August, the omens were both good and bad.

The bad omens were obvious enough: namely, Italy's desperately disappointing showing at Euro 2024. It was not just the *Azzurri's* second-round exit at the hands of Switzerland that hurt; arguably more painful was the imperious manner in which the eventual winners, Spain, hounded and humiliated Italy off the pitch in their 1-0 group-stage victory.

It was a display that prompted much soul-searching, with *Gazzetta dello Sport* carrying the headline: "*Piccola Italia*" (Little Italy) – had the four-time world champions really sunk that low?

The national team, so often a source of pride, can no longer be relied upon to demonstrate the merits of Italian football. Instead, that role falls to Serie A.

The good news is that after two seasons in which Italian clubs featured in five of the six UEFA finals, Serie A's ranking has dramatically improved to the extent that this season Italy will field five clubs in the Champions League – Inter, Milan, Juventus, Atalanta and Bologna.

This season, as always, the search for the new champions begins with the first of those three – winners between them of 75 of Italy's 122 title contests. Even in the 21st century, the title has gone to a club other than the three dominant "Titans" just three times (Lazio in 2000, Roma in 2001 and Napoli in 2023).

Inter, reinforced by Iran striker Mehdi Taremi (ex-Porto) and Poland midfielder Piotr Zielinski (Napoli), have thus far retained all the key players which last season dominated the league, eventually winning the title by a crushing 19 points from Milan. With defenders Francesco Acerbi and Federico Dimarco, midfielders Nicolo Barella and Hakan Calhanoglu, striker Marcus Thuram and above all, captain Lautaro Martinez, Inter look like easily the strongest club in the land.

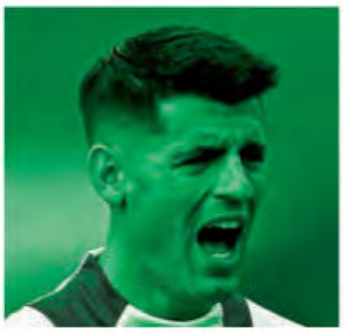
> Serie A's ranking has dramatically improved to the extent that this season Italy will field five clubs in the Champions League

Old Lady...Juventus are ready to challenge champions Inter

Inter obviously need to beware of Juventus, winners of 36 titles and now hungry after a four-year fast. The most intriguing aspect of Juve's forthcoming season is their new coach Thiago Motta.

Milan, with Paulo Fonseca now in charge, look harder to gauge. This will be the Portuguese coach's second stint in Italy after leading Roma for two seasons, and he arrives off the back of leading Lille to fourth place in Ligue 1. He has title-winning experience, winning three Ukrainian Premier Leagues with Shakhtar Donetsk, and has also signed a proven winner in Euro 2024 champion Alvaro Morata. The Spaniard fills the void left by last season's top scorer Olivier Giroud as an experienced No.9 to lead the line – albeit with more mobility.

Paddy Agnew



ALVARO MORATA
(Milan)
Beginning his third period in Serie A after two spells with Juventus (2014-16 and 2020-22). After leading Spain to Euro 2024 glory, the experienced No.9 could be an inspired *Rossoneri* signing in the style of Zlatan Ibrahimovic four years ago.

MATTEO GUENDOUZI
(Lazio)
Arguably Lazio's best player last season, so it came as no surprise when the Roman club paid Marseille €15m to make his loan deal permanent. The ex-Arsenal man still has plenty of admirers in the Premier League.

THIJS DALLINGA
(Bologna)
Tasked with replacing fellow Dutchman Joshua Zirkzee, who led the line so well in Bologna's impressive 2023-24 campaign. An intelligent, technical yet industrious striker, he scored 14 Ligue 1 goals for Toulouse last term.

KHEPHREN THURAM
(Juventus)
Last summer Inter snapped up striker Marcus Thuram, who became a key player in their title-winning side, and Juve hope his younger midfield brother can do the same for them. Both are, of course, sons of Juve and France great Lilian.

RAFAEL LEAO
(Milan)
Milan supporters can be forgiven for thinking that much will depend on Leao in the new-look team. At times, the Portugal star is devastating, looking like the best left-winger in the world. But he can also have his quiet days.

Serie A new boys ...Como players celebrate securing their promotion

COMO OUT TO IMPRESS

Of this year's three promoted teams, Como prompt the most curiosity. While Parma return to the top level after a three-year absence and Venezia just two, it is 21 years since Como were last here.

The team is now coached by ex-Spain, Arsenal and Barcelona star Cesc Fabregas who, after ending his playing career with Como, subsequently joined their coaching staff. As interim coach last season (he lacked the required coaching licence), he was clearly a key factor in the club's promotion, earning himself a four-year contract as head coach in July.

Como is owned by Indonesia's wealthiest family, the Hartono Family, which owns Bank Central Asia and the tobacco giant Djarum, and some high-profile names have been added – most notably Raphael Varane, out of contract at Manchester United. Indonesia-born Emil Audero (signed from Inter) and Pepe Reina (Villarreal) will strengthen the goalkeeping department, while former Italy striker Andrea Belotti (Roma) should provide the goals.

ATALANTA AND NAPOLI LEAD THE CHASING PACK

If anyone can upset the established Inter-Juventus-Milan triumvirate, it will most likely be Atalanta, so impressive in winning the 2023-24 Europa League. After beating Bayer Leverkusen 3-0 in the final, coach Gian Piero Gasperini hinted that he had taken the team as far as he could. But, after being linked with a move to Napoli, the 66-year-old committed to extending his eight-year stay with renewed ambition.

Preparations, however, have been hit by injury to last season's top goalscorer Gianluca Scamacca, who looks set to miss most of the season after undergoing ACL surgery. His Italy strike partner Mateo Retegui has been drafted in from Genoa for €22m as a replacement.

Gasperini's decision to stay put in Bergamo opened the door for Antonio Conte to take charge at Napoli. The old warrior coach will be hoping to add another Serie A crown to his collection (three at Juventus and one at Inter) as he looks to help the club redeem their meek surrendering of the title last term.

TOTAL COACHING TURNOVER

What have Gasperini, Alberto Gilardino (Genoa), Simone Inzaghi (Inter), Fabio Pecchia (Parma), Luca Gotti (Lecce) and Daniele De Rossi (Roma) all got in common? They are the only coaches to have remained in charge of their teams, in a new season in which 13 of the 20 clubs have made changes in the dugout.

The wholesale clear-out poses some tantalising questions. After a remarkable season in which he inspired habitual relegation battlers Bologna to Champions League qualification, can Thiago Motta work his magic with Juventus?

Bologna themselves provide another big question with Motta replaced by Vincenzo Italiano, a coach who has just completed three lively seasons in charge of Fiorentina. Italiano reached three cup finals with the Tuscan club (twice in the Conference League and one Italian Cup) only to lose all three. Can he pick up where Motta left off? Without Riccardo Calafiori (now at Arsenal), Joshua Zirkzee (Manchester United) and Lewis Ferguson (recovering from a knee injury), it will be difficult.

And what about Raffaele Palladino, who has been tasked with replacing Italiano at Fiorentina? Having done well in two seasons at Monza, can he live up to his reputation as one of the emerging new wave of Italian coaches?

Paddy Agnew

Big expectations... new Juventus boss Thiago Motta

WHO'S WHO?

ATALANTA
Manager: Gian Piero Gasperini

BOLOGNA
Manager: Vincenzo Italiano

CAGLIARI
Manager: Davide Nicola

COMO
Manager: Cesc Fabregas

EMPOLI
Manager: Roberto D'Aversa

FIORENTINA
Manager: Raffaele Palladino

GENOA
Manager: Alberto Gilardino

HELLAS VERONA
Manager: Paolo Zanetti

INTERNAZIONALE
Manager: Simone Inzaghi

JUVENTUS
Manager: Thiago Motta

LAZIO
Manager: Marco Baroni

LECCE
Manager: Luca Gotti

MILAN
Manager: Paulo Fonseca

MONZA
Manager: Alessandro Nesta

NAPOLI
Manager: Antonio Conte

PARMA
Manager: Fabio Pecchia

ROMA
Manager: Daniele De Rossi

TORINO
Manager: Paolo Vanoli

UDINESE
Manager: Kosta Runjaic

VENEZIA
Manager: Eusebio Di Francesco

Celtic set the standards

Brendan Rodgers' side hot favourites for a fourth consecutive league title

Daunting...Celtic celebrate during their pre-season friendly win over Chelsea

Dwelling too much on pre-season form is rarely sensible, yet any side hoping to end Celtic's run of three consecutive Scottish Premiership titles will have been daunted by the Bhoys' summer tour of the United States.

After dispatching MLS side D.C. United 4-0 in Washington, Brendan Rodgers' team took on Premier League outfits Manchester City and Chelsea, winning 4-3 and 4-1 respectively. True, they were further ahead in their pre-season programme than their English opponents, yet it was part of a serene summer of preparation.

Denmark goalkeeper Kasper Schmeichel was the headline signing, reuniting with his former Leicester City boss Rodgers and replacing the retired Joe Hart, while Paulo Bernardo joined permanently from Benfica after his successful loan spell. After they won their first game of the new season 4-0 against Kilmarnock, bookmakers Paddy Power paid out on Celtic retaining their title.

> After they won their first game of the season 4-0 against Kilmarnock, bookmakers Paddy Power paid out on Celtic retaining their title

The contrast with arch-rivals Rangers was stark. While Celtic were locking horns with the English champions, the Gers were losing 2-1 to Birmingham City – recently relegated to the third tier of English football.

That, though, was the least of Rangers' worries. They began the 2024-25 season unable to play at Ibrox, with work to expand the ground delayed by a late shipment of materials. While they are waiting, the Gers will play at the national stadium, Hampden Park, and chairman John Bennett has admitted that they may not return home until October.

The financial pressure to get back to Ibrox as soon as possible is acute, as a long stay at Hampden will rack up the bills. Manager Philippe Clement has expressed his frustration at the financial limitations but he has also overseen an overhaul of his squad, with Twente centre-back Robin Propper the club's ninth signing of the summer. Mohamed Diomande and Oscar Cortes will stay at the club after initially joining on loan in January, Czech winger Vaclav Cerny arrived on loan from Wolfsburg, while midfielder Connor Barron, signed from Aberdeen, was one of four other players aged 21 or younger to sign.

The permanent departures of long-serving players like Connor Goldson, John Lundstram, Borna Barisic, Ryan Jack and Kemar Roofe indicate that Clement is keen to put a marker down in what will be his first full season in Scotland having replaced Michael Beale last October.

In August, the Belgian penned a contract extension until 2028, saying he had "fallen in love with the club" and the feeling will be mutual if he can end Celtic's grip on the title. Rangers were top of the league as late as March before being overtaken, but this season's plans have been undermined not only by the stadium issues but also by former England Under-21 midfielder Todd Cantwell handing in a transfer request.

Permanent signing... Mohamed Diomande

The pessimism at Rangers was not improved by a goalless draw with Hearts on the opening day. The Edinburgh club's third-place finish last term, 12 points ahead of Kilmarnock, was an impressive managerial debut for Steven Naismith, underwritten by 24 goals from the league's top scorer Lawrence Shankland. Keeping the Scotland striker in Edinburgh will be crucial; at the time of writing, the club's CEO insisted that no offers had been received.

Elsewhere, the return of Dundee United, just one season after relegation, brings back one of Europe's over-achievers. The one-time Scottish champions (in 1982-83) famously beat Barcelona in both the 1966-67 Fairs Cup and 1986-87 UEFA Cup, and this year they renewed their link to the Catalan giants with new signing David Babunski. The North Macedonia midfielder, who joined from Mezokovesd in Hungary, spent ten years in Barca's academy and trained with the first team under Pep Guardiola alongside the likes of Lionel Messi, Xavi and Andres Iniesta. United manager Jim Goodwin will hope that the 15-cap international, whom he first tried to sign two years ago, will light up Tannadice.

The Tangerines' campaign began with a derby versus Dundee, for whom striker Seb Palmer-Houlden scored in a 2-2 draw. That was the 20-year-old's fourth goal in three games (including the Scottish League Cup) after joining on loan from Bristol City, and exciting things are expected from the young forward.

Phil Gordon

Life after Kylian

The chasing pack have invested in managerial quality as they look to rein in Mbappe-less PSG

No Kylian Mbappe, no Neymar, no Lionel Messi; for the first time since 2017, Paris Saint-Germain go into a Ligue 1 campaign without one of the world's iconic footballers among their ranks.

After three years of dominance in France, culminating in a domestic treble last season, does the departure of the final *Galactico* vanquish their air of infallibility? Perhaps a little, but certainly not entirely. In appointing Luis Enrique and then more importantly backing him, most notably through supporting his decision to drop Mbappe, *Les Parisiens* have put a strong and principled manager at the heart of the project. In their pursuit to not only bridge the gap to PSG, but to surpass them, rivals have now followed suit.

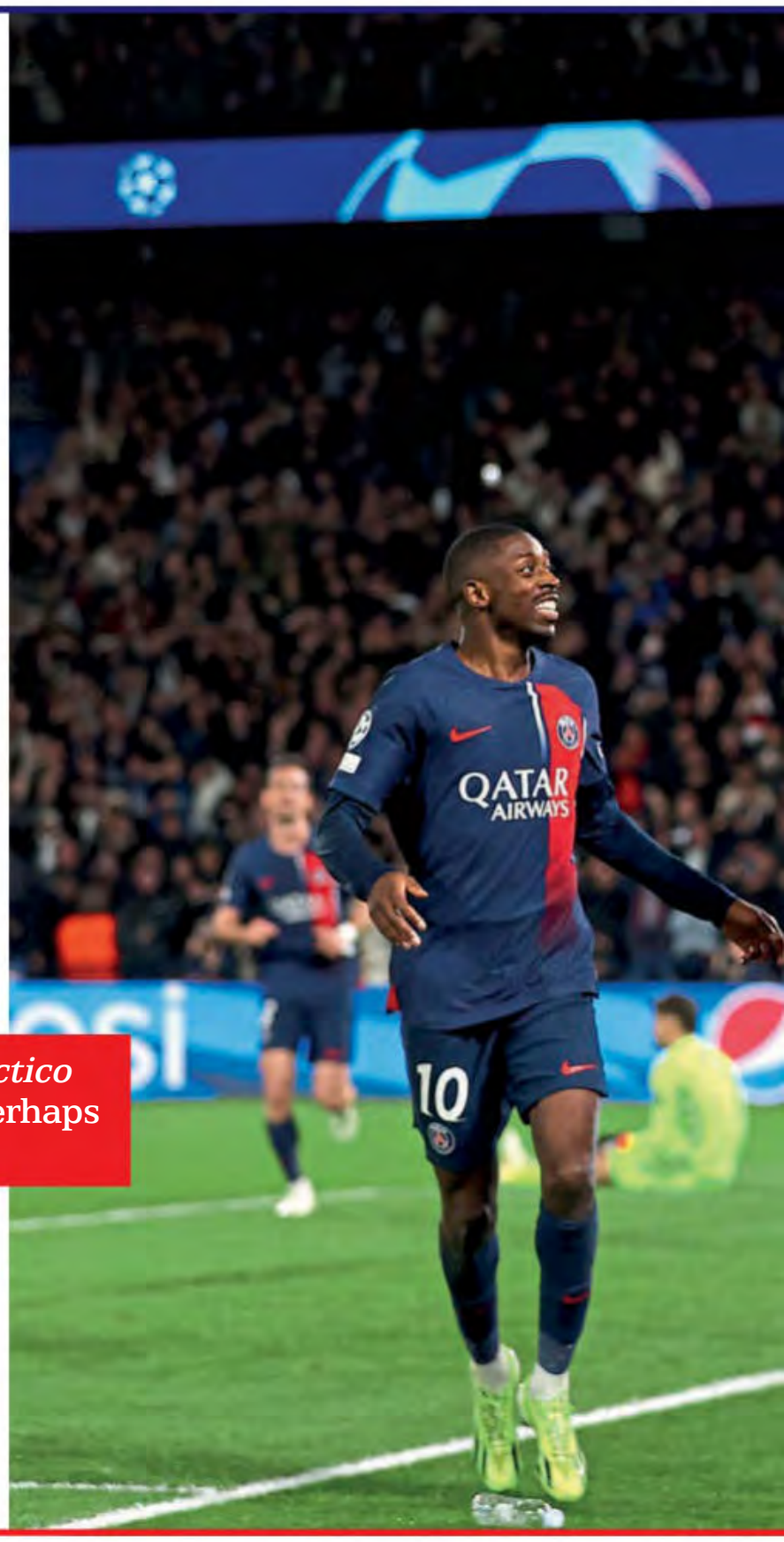
None of the top three have changed managers: PSG retained Luis Enrique, Monaco kept Adi Hutter and Brest Eric Roy, but five of last season's top ten did make a managerial change, either voluntarily or involuntarily.

Among the changes, there are some well-deserved promotions. Luka Elsner performed excellently at Le Havre, earning the side promotion before keeping them in the top flight, and has replaced Will Still at Reims. Still himself has moved on, with his ambition to return to England putting paid to his time with *Les Stadistes*, but that move did not come to fruition. He did, though, still achieve an upgrade while also moving closer to the English Channel, replacing Franck Haise at Lens.

Touted for a move abroad and commended for leading Lens from Ligue 2 to within one point of PSG and the Champions League, Haise also moved in the game of managerial musical chairs, remaining in Ligue 1 and replacing Francesco Farioli at Nice. Ligue 1's brightest young players may not stick around for long – Mbappe (Real Madrid), Leny Yoro (Manchester United), Khephren Thuram (Juventus) and Jean-Clair Todibo (West Ham) – but the retention of managerial talent holds promise of a tactically-captivating and exciting league season.

> Does the departure of the final *Galactico* vanquish PSG's air of infallibility? Perhaps a little, but certainly not entirely

That pool of managerial talent has been replenished by the arrival of the Italian Roberto De Zerbi at Marseille. The ex-Brighton boss is a rare beast in Ligue 1: arriving as a manager in his prime and with his reputation



PLAYERS TO WATCH

GEORGES MIKAUTADZE
(Lyon)
Euro 2024's joint-top scorer almost single-handedly kept Metz in Ligue 1 last season with 13 league goals, despite spending half of the season at Ajax. Now at boyhood club Lyon, his goals could propel a title challenge.

JONATHAN CLAUSS
(Nice)
After two years at Marseille, the France right-back has reunited with former coach Franck Haise, under whom his electric form for Lens originally earned him his international call-up. Their partnership could prove very productive for Nice.

FOLARIN BALOGUN
(Monaco)
After a tricky "period of adaptation", as he put it, Balogun, now unburdened by the pressure of competing with departed club captain Wissam Ben Yedder, looks primed to rediscover the goalscoring touch that made him such hot property.

BRADLEY BARCOLA
(Paris Saint-Germain)
Having more than exceeded expectations in his debut season, Barcola has the daunting task of replacing Mbappe. The electric winger is capable of producing the same creative spark as the France captain, if not the statistical output.

DILANE BAKWA
(Strasbourg)
Of all the top prospects Strasbourg captured last summer, the 22-year-old forward is potentially the most exciting. His six assists and a high-ranking across multiple key metrics in his debut campaign in Ligue 1 reflect his exciting potential.

New generation... Bradley Barcola will lead PSG's post-Mbappe era

Exciting arrival...new Marseille head coach Roberto De Zerbi at the Stade Velodrome

already carved. It is a coup, not just for OM but for the league. Without European football but with considerable backing – which includes signings like Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg (Tottenham), Elye Wahi (Lens) and Ismael Kone (Watford) – Marseille should once again be a force to be reckoned with following last season's farce.

The self-professed "League of Talents" may have seen its talent pool considerably drained this summer but with the managerial ceiling of the division being raised, quality won't suffer. The tantalising scent of opportunity in an Mbappe-less Ligue 1 gives hope to PSG's rivals, who despite a lack of investment have seemingly made the correct choices to bridge the gap, which last season became a gulf.

Luke Entwistle

TIAGO SANTOS
(Lille)
In his debut season at Lille, the Portugal Under-21 ace asserted himself as one of the most exciting young right-backs in Europe. The offensive-minded defender could become LOSC's next big-money sale, should he back up his stellar start.

VALENTIN CARBONI
(Marseille)
The signing of Argentina international Carboni is emblematic of Marseille's ambitious transfer window. After an impressive loan at Monza, he joins from Inter and will be expecting to lead the playmaking efforts in De Zerbi's side.

GUILLAUME RESTES
(Toulouse)
France's next great goalkeeping prospect will be looking to make *Les Bleus'* No.1 jersey his own in the years to come; he certainly alluded to such a trajectory with his eye-catching shot-stopping for Toulouse last campaign.

ZURIKO DAVITASHVILI
(Saint-Etienne)
The 23-year-old already has 39 Georgia caps and a wealth of experience in French football. After two eye-catching Ligue 2 campaigns with Bordeaux (13 goals, ten assists) the Georgian winger earned a move to Saint-Etienne.

JOAO NEVES
(Paris Saint-Germain)
Neves arrives from Benfica for big money and with big expectations. The €60m deep-lying playmaker will add a new dimension to what is already a well-stocked and versatile midfield ensemble in Paris.

Over-achievers... Brest may struggle to repeat last campaign's unprecedented success

BREST BACK DOWN TO EARTH?

Brest were Ligue 1's surprise package last term, securing European qualification for the first time in the club's history. As they embark on a debut Champions League campaign, the gloss has been somewhat taken off by the news that their stadium does not meet UEFA regulations, meaning they will borrow second-tier Guingamp's ground instead.

More worryingly, Brest appear to be unprepared for the step up. Sporting director Gregory Lorenzi made it clear last season that Champions League qualification wouldn't precipitate a huge summer of spending at the Breton club, and he wasn't bluffing. Adding depth and quality has been somewhat of a struggle; even retaining journeyman striker Steve Mounie (ex-Huddersfield Town) proved beyond them. Through a lack of means rather than a lack of ambition, Brest's drop-off this season looks inevitable.

BLUECO DOUBLE-DOWN

BlueCo's arrival at Strasbourg heralded a new era and a new strategy. Balancing youth with experience is the cornerstone of squad construction for most clubs, even in a youthful Ligue 1 – but not at Strasbourg. Since the club's takeover last summer there has been a concerted effort to significantly decrease the average age of the squad, culminating in RCSA fielding the four youngest starting XIs in Ligue 1 last season.

After narrowly avoiding relegation, Patrick Vieira wanted to add experience; instead, BlueCo doubled-down on their youth-centric approach, with prospects such as Guela Doue, Oscar Perea, Caleb Wiley and Andrey Santos arriving (the latter two on loan from Chelsea) and experienced heads such as Kevin Gameiro, Lebo Mothiba and Ibrahima Sissoko leaving. That led to Vieira's departure and, in keeping with the club's approach, he has been replaced by 40-year-old Liam Rosenior in only his second permanent senior role.

YO-YO CLUBS

Following relegation the previous season, Auxerre and Angers returned to France's top flight at the first time of asking. The former did so convincingly, having stuck with promotion specialist Christophe Pelissier. Angers also kept with the man who took them down, Alexandre Dujeux, promoted from his role as assistant coach amid a period of turbulence at the club.

After a two-year absence, fallen giants Saint-Etienne are back on the rise – and with wealthy Canadian investors. They are led by a safe pair of hands in the form of Olivier Dall'Oglio. The ex-Montpellier and Brest boss has, unlike Pelissier and Dujeux, never been relegated from Ligue 1.

While ASSE should be confident of re-establishing themselves as top-flight regulars, Auxerre and Angers look more consigned to repeating the yo-yo trend.

TIGHTENED PURSE STRINGS?

For much of last season, there was an impending sense of doom as Ligue 1 sleepwalked into a deepening crisis as the LFP tried to negotiate the broadcasting rights for the upcoming cycle.

The summer transfer window opened without a broadcaster being found; the purse strings of Ligue 1 clubs would be tightened, it was prophesied. Not exactly. Some clubs have been frugal, especially those newly promoted, and caution in light of the financial uncertainties surrounding French football has been evident. But there has been spending. In fact, at the time of writing Ligue 1 is the fourth-highest-spending league of the summer, ahead of La Liga. A far from lucrative agreement has since been struck but the consequences of that are yet to be felt.

Luke Entwistle

New coach... Liam Rosenior at Strasbourg

On the up...Saint-Etienne came up via the play-offs

WHO'S WHO?

ANGERS
Manager: Alexandre Dujeux

AUXERRE
Manager: Christophe Pelissier

BREST
Manager: Eric Roy

LE HAVRE
Manager: Didier Digard

LENS
Manager: Will Still

LILLE
Manager: Bruno Genesio

LYON
Manager: Pierre Sage

MARSEILLE
Manager: Roberto De Zerbi

MONACO
Manager: Adi Hutter

MONTPELLIER
Manager: Michel Der Zakarian

NANTES
Manager: Antoine Kombouare

NICE
Manager: Franck Haise

PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN
Manager: Luis Enrique

REIMS
Manager: Luka Elsner

RENNES
Manager: Julien Stephan

SAINT-ETIENNE
Manager: Olivier Dall'Oglio

STRASBOURG
Manager: Liam Rosenior

TOULOUSE
Manager: Carles Martinez Novell

Jose predicts 'big things' at Fenerbahce

Turkey's febrile atmospheres will be dialled up a notch with the arrival of Portuguese coach Jose Mourinho

All eyes on Jose ...Mourinho in the Fenerbahce dugout

No prizes for predicting who will be the centre of attention in this season's Super Lig. After three decades working – and often winning – in Portugal, Spain, England and Italy, Jose Mourinho is now at the helm of Istanbul giants Fenerbahce, where his mission is to bring an immediate end to ten years of domestic title drought.

Mourinho, who was sacked by Roma early this year, is thirsting to disprove the theory that he is yesterday's man and, fortunately for him, has taken over a club team in robust sporting health. Despite narrowly losing out to arch-rivals Galatasaray in last season's championship title race, there was much for the Fenerbahce faithful to enthuse about: a meaty 99-point haul built on 31 victories and just one defeat, the collective grit and purpose instilled by Mourinho's predecessor Ismail Kartal and the individual class of evergreen Serbian playmaker Dusan Tadic, utility man Ferdi Kadioglu, Poland playmaker Sebastian Szymanski and Dutch left-back Jayden Oosterwolde.

Fenerbahce director of sport Mario Branco has, by common consent, put in an excellent recruitment shift, securing the signatures of French dribbling virtuoso Allan Saint-Maximin on loan from Saudi side Al Ahli, promising young Alanyaspor right-winger Oguz Aydin and ex-Germany Under-20 left-back Levent Mercan from Fatih Karagumruk.

Mourinho would also have been delighted with the acquisition from Sevilla of the Moroccan striker Youssef En-Nesyri, for a Turkish Super Lig record transfer fee of €19.5 million. En-Nesyri, who in four years with Sevilla scored 73 goals in 196 competitive appearances and twice won the Europa League with the Andalusians, should form a heavyweight front-line duo at the Sukru Saracoglu Stadium with veteran Bosnian and club captain Edin Dzeko.

"When people look at me – I coached in six European finals and won five of them – they straight away think big," declared Mourinho in typically bombastic mode at his unveiling.

> "When people look at me – I coached in six European finals and won five of them – they straight away think big"
> Jose Mourinho at his Fenerbahce unveiling

One player who will not be wearing the yellow-and-navy of Fenerbahce in 2024-25 is the Belgium national teamer Michy Batshuayi, who controversially opted to move across Istanbul to join reigning champions Galatasaray. Needless to say, his decision sparked acrimony a plenty, with his wife revealing that she had received death threats on social media. "Shame on those who threaten my family and wish death on my child for football," she posted.

Seven times Turkish champions in the last 13 years, Galatasaray are targeting a third straight Super Lig crown, but much will depend on the status of key personnel. At the time of writing, Baris Alper Yilmaz is still at the club but may not be for long after attracting admirers with a string of impressive performances for Turkey at Euro 2024. Meanwhile, Argentine striker Mauro Icardi, the top scorer in the top flight last season with 25 goals, still seems to be carrying the ankle injury that forced him to play through the pain barrier last term.

Controversial... Michy Batshuayi has transferred across Istanbul

In better news for the *Cim Bom*, Moroccan creative midfielder Hakim Ziyech – who shone on loan from Chelsea last season – now has a permanent deal, while golden oldie Belgian forward Dries Mertens, 37, has signed on for another year. Denmark right-back Elias Jelert, 21, snapped up for €9m from FC Copenhagen, and Brazilian midfielder Gabriel Sara, an €18m capture from Norwich City, should prove solid acquisitions.

Besiktas, league champions as recently as 2020-21, urgently need a fillip after finishing a sub-par sixth last season. Their new coach, the Dutchman Giovanni van Bronckhorst, is sure to be under pressure from the off, though undoubtedly will be pleased with the quality of the club's summer signings, particularly Italian goal machine Ciro Immobile (ex-Lazio), holding midfielder Al-Musrati (Braga), the much-underrated Portuguese second striker Rafa Silva (Benfica) and the experienced Brazilian centre-back Gabriel Paulista, once of Villarreal, Arsenal and Atletico Madrid.

Nick Bidwell

Amorim gives Sporting the edge

The champions' outstanding manager Ruben Amorim makes them favourites to defend their Portuguese title

Not since 1954 have Sporting Clube de Portugal won back-to-back league titles. The fact the Lisbon club are well placed to do something they have not achieved for 70 years is a measure of the transformative effect manager Ruben Amorim has had not only on Sporting, but on Portuguese football as a whole since his appointment in 2020.

Recent history had been especially bleak for Sporting. In practically four decades before the appointment of Amorim, the Lions had been crowned national champions just twice. Porto and Benfica were so far ahead, the country's traditional Big Three was in serious danger of becoming a Big Two. That all changed when club president Frederico Varandas paid Braga what was considered "crazy money" at the time, meeting the northerners' buyout clause of €10 million to contract the then-35-year-old coach.

Amorim duly guided Sporting to the title in his first full season, nearly repeated the trick the following year, and won a second league crown in four campaigns in 2023-24. With Porto hamstrung by severe financial constraints and the majority of Benfica fans uneasy about the continuation of manager Roger Schmidt after a poor season, Sporting start off in the unusual position of favourites to lift the crown come May.

While Amorim can be considered Sporting's trump card, there are other reasons for supporters to be optimistic about their club's chances of defending the title, not least the retention – at the time of writing – of striker Viktor Gyokeres. Sporting splashed out a record transfer fee of over €20m to sign the Swede, but as in the case of Amorim it has turned out to be a bargain. Forty-three goals and 14 assists in 50 matches in all competitions, and a thrilling all-action style of play, made Gyokeres a unanimous choice as Player of the Season in Portugal. An end-of-season knee operation and a €100m buyout clause have apparently combined to keep him at the club for another year, and other key players – Goncalo Inacio, Morten Hjulmand and Pedro Goncalves – also remain at the Alvalade (for now). And while veteran captain Sebastian Coates, who has returned to his native Uruguay with Nacional, will be missed, Sporting have a handful of exciting youngsters looking to make their mark in the first team, notably centre-back Ousmane Diomande (20 years old), midfielder Mateus Fernandes (19) and winger Geovany Quenda (17).

"It's special winning this title because the context was different to the last time [during the COVID pandemic]," said Amorim upon clinching the league in May. "This time our fans can celebrate and now we're going to go for a third title."

Porto president... Andre Villas-Boas

RENATO'S REBIRTH

Renato Sanches had the world at his feet in the summer of 2016. Having played a significant role both in Benfica winning the league in his debut season

PLAYERS TO WATCH

ROGER FERNANDES
(Braga)
It seems he's been around for years after becoming Braga's youngest-ever goalscorer at 15. Having improved year-on-year and still only 18, the forward is ripe to explode this season.

GIANLUCA PRESTIANNI
(Benfica)
A series of scintillating displays in pre-season catapulted the diminutive, skilful and quick-witted 18-year-old Argentine from a potential loanee to a probable starter for Benfica.

GEOVANY QUENDA
(Sporting)
Born in Guinea-Bissau, the Portugal youth international is an exciting left-footed winger with wonderful dribbling technique and remarkable maturity for a 17-year-old.

Star coach...Sporting boss Ruben Amorim

and then Portugal winning their maiden major trophy – Sanches was named Young Player of the Tournament at Euro 2016 – that year's Golden Boy secured a big-money move to Bayern Munich.

It is legitimate to argue that it was too much too soon. A never-ending catalogue of injuries at a series of clubs in different countries has prevented the Lisbon-born footballer from replicating the stunning form of his first year as a professional. Back at Benfica on loan from Paris Saint-Germain, the 27-year-old will be hoping the familiar surroundings imbibed with happy memories provide the platform for him to shine again.

PORTO BEGIN LIFE WITHOUT PINTO DA COSTA

Elected Porto president in 1982, Jorge Nuno Pinto da Costa helped transform what had been a regional club into an international powerhouse and the dominant force in Portuguese football. His triumphant, but often controversial, reign finally came to an end earlier this year as former coach Andre Villas-Boas swept to a landslide presidential victory, promising to re-energise a crumbling empire that was spiralling into an abyss.

Villas-Boas promised a complete change in the culture of the club, where sporting excellence remained the goal but not built on the foundations of confrontation. Doing so without losing the ferocious competitiveness that has so characterised Porto is a difficult trick to pull off, especially with a squad put together at minimal cost, but a sensational season-opening Super Cup victory where the Dragons recovered from a 3-0 deficit to beat Sporting 4-3 was a stunning start.

> Sporting start off in the unusual position of favourites to lift the Portuguese league crown come May

MANAGERS ON THE UP

With the likes of Paulo Fonseca (previously of Lille and now Milan) and Marco Silva (Fulham) maintaining the fine reputation of Portuguese managers who emerged in the wake of the greatest of them all, Jose Mourinho, European clubs could do worse than keep an eye on a number of talented coaches in the Primeira Liga. Luis Freire at Rio Ave, Armando Evangelista at Famalicao and Rui Borges at Vitoria are all managers with an excellent body of work behind them. It would be no surprise if one or more of them joined Amorim in becoming a highly coveted Portuguese coach in the coming years.

Also of note is the return of Ian Cathro, who takes over at Estoril. The 38-year-old Scottish manager assisted Nuno Espirito Santo at Rio Ave and then followed him to a number of other clubs, either side of an unsuccessful spell as Hearts' head coach.

Tom Kundert

18+

WHAT IS AVAXHOME?

AVAXHOME-

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Cheap constant access to piping hot media
Protect your downloadings from Big brother
Safer, than torrent-trackers

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Brand new content
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Can anyone keep up with PSV?

The holders are clear favourites to retain their Dutch title

It's not just that PSV were so impressive last season, finishing seven points clear at the top of the Eredivisie, that makes them such clear favourites for the title; it's also that their main rivals are all in transition.

For Feyenoord, new coach Brian Priske must show that there is life after Arne Slot, and faces a daunting task in replacing someone who not only delivered silverware but also was highly popular. Meanwhile, at Ajax, new coach Francesco Farioli needs all his enthusiasm and optimism to get the team out of the doldrums.

A team that only lost one game, scored the most goals and conceded the fewest, will be hard to catch. PSV, unlike their counterparts in Amsterdam, seem to have their house order. The backbone of the team remains, while loan contracts with Sergino Dest and Malik Tillman have been converted into permanent deals. In addition, coach Peter Bosz landed his top target: left-winger Couhaib Driouech. The Dutch-born Morocco Under-23 international was on his way from Excelsior to PSV last winter, but the deal was cancelled at the last minute. This time, with his former club relegated, there were no barriers.

If logic in football exists, Feyenoord will be PSV's main challengers. But that all depends on how quickly Priske can dispel the shadow of Slot, which still hangs over De Kuip. The Dane arrives in Rotterdam with a league title at Sparta Prague under his belt, but a coach who clinched a national title, a national cup and reached the Conference League final in his three-year spell will be hard to succeed.

Priske will also have to do without Netherlands midfielder Mats Wieffer who joined Brighton in a €30 million deal. A change in formation from 4-3-3 to 3-4-3 has so far not been successful – most clearly demonstrated in a 5-0 friendly defeat to Benfica – although winning the Dutch Super Cup on penalties after an entertaining 4-4 draw with PSV was a bonus.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

PEER KOOPMEINERS
(AZ)
The 24-year-old midfielder, and younger brother of Europa League winner and Dutch international Teun, had an excellent season on loan at Almere City and seems ready for his breakthrough.

NOAH OHIO
(Utrecht)
Previously on the books of both Manchester clubs and RB Leipzig but may benefit from a step back. Played for England U16s with Jude Bellingham and Jamal Musiala but now a Dutch U21 international.

SAM LAMMERS
(Twente)
A move to Rangers didn't work out, but 11 goals in 20 matches on loan at Utrecht last season – plus 19 goals at Heerenveen in 2018-19 – suggests the 27-year-old is made for the Eredivisie.

Team to beat...PSV will be favourites for the 2024-25 Eredivisie title

Under scrutiny...Ajax's Jordan Henderson

As for Ajax, some say it will take five years before they are back on track again such was the chaos last campaign. Farioli must show that something "nice" has come from the south of France to Amsterdam. At least the Italian has taken drastic measures by starting a big clean up. There is no place anymore for highly expensive players like Owen Wijndal, Benjamin Tahirovic and Borna Sosa, while keeper Geronimo Rulli, a World Cup winner with Argentina, has left for Marseille. Instead Farioli has turned to youth, giving the likes of Youri Baas, Kian Fitz-Jim and Mika Godts a chance.

One of the players most benefitting from Farioli's arrival has been Portugal U21 winger Carlos Forbs. The former Manchester City youngster appeared to be on his way out after failing to fulfil his potential, but meets the new coach's need for a speedy attacker. Coach and club must pray he isn't the only one this season showing a vast improvement.

> If logic in football exists, Feyenoord will be PSV's main challengers

HENDERSON READY TO PROVE HIS WORTH

Former Liverpool midfielder Jordan Henderson arrived in the Netherlands during the winter break after leaving Saudi club Ettifaq, but there were immediate questions about whether he was the right man for Ajax. And although expectations, especially in Amsterdam, were high, so far his critics have been proved right. He couldn't leave his mark on the team – partly due to injury – costing him his place at Euro 2024. Under Farioli, the England man gets a new chance to show his leadership that Ajax so badly need.

VAN PERSIE BEGINS HIS MANAGERIAL ADVENTURE

This is former Arsenal and Manchester United striker Robin van Persie's maiden season as head coach of Heerenveen. The ex-Dutch international (102 caps, 50 goals) looked like being groomed for the top job at his hometown club Feyenoord, leading the club's U18s last season. But the 41-year-old, like the independent thinker he is, decided that a move to 11th-placed Heerenveen better suited his career progression, opting to sign a two-year deal at the Frisian club, where he can work without the pressure and spotlight of a top club.

BIG SHOES FOR PARROTT TO FILL

When Greece star Vangelis Pavlidis – who shared last season's Eredivisie top scorer prize with PSV's Luuk de Jong – moved to Benfica, AZ turned to a relatively unknown Irishman. The Tottenham academy graduate had loan spells at Millwall, Ipswich Town, MK Dons and Preston North End without ever looking like a free-scoring striker. However, after netting ten goals in 25 games for relegated Excelsior while on loan last term, AZ were quick to offer him a five-year deal. The Alkmaar club, who are known for using the Moneyball formula, could be a springboard for the 22-year-old Republic of Ireland striker – just as they were for Pavlidis.

Klaas-Jan Droppert

BULGARIA

2024-25 TEAMS

- Arda Kardzhali
- Beroe Stara Zagora
- Botev Plovdiv
- Botev Vratsa
- Cherno More Varna
- CSKA 1948 Sofia
- CSKA Sofia
- Hebar 1918 Pazardzhik
- Krumovgrad
- Levski Sofia
- Lokomotiv Plovdiv
- Lokomotiv Sofia
- Ludogorets Razgrad
- Septemvri Sofia
- Slavia Sofia
- Spartak Varna

FIRST LEAGUE – A BRIEF HISTORY

This year marked a century since the first edition of the Bulgarian State Football Championship, the country's first national football tournament. That was a knockout competition, replaced by a league format in 1948-49. The Bulgarian Football Union (BFU) have applied various changes to the competition's structure over the years, while teams have come and gone. Traditionally the league was dominated by the Sofia clubs, with 70 of the 98 titles going to the capital city, but Ludogorets brought that reign to an end in 2012 and haven't looked back since.

THE FORMAT

The number of top-flight clubs in Bulgaria has varied over the years, but since 2021-22 the league has been contested by 16 teams. The latest campaign has seen yet another new format: each team plays each other twice before the league splits in April; the top four compete for the title, the next four compete for Conference League qualification, and the bottom eight attempt to avoid relegation. The bottom two go down automatically to the Second League, with the 13th and 14th-placed sides going into a play-off with two second-tier clubs.

HONOURS BOARD

Club	*Title wins*	*Runners-up*	*Last title*
CSKA Sofia	31	28	2007-08
Levski Sofia	26	32	2008-09
Ludogorets Razgrad	13	0	2023-24
Slavia Sofia	7	10	1995-96
Cherno More Varna	4	7	1937-38
Lokomotiv Sofia	4	6	1977-78
Litex Lovech	4	1	2010-11

Is Ludogorets' hegemony good or bad for Bulgarian football?
With an incredible record of 13 league titles in a row, Ludogorets are the undisputed kings of Bulgarian football. Since the club was bought by entrepreneur Kiril Domuschiev in 2010, the club's strategy has been flawless, drawing plenty of foreign admirers.

During this period, they have qualified for the Champions League group stage twice – in 2014-15 and 2016-17 – reached the last 32 of the Europa League on four occasions – including getting to the last 16 in 2013-14 – and reached the Conference League knockout round play-offs last season, all of which helps raise the profile and the coefficient of the Bulgarian league.

Critics argue that this success, which is largely thanks to the input of foreign players, does little for Bulgarian football; in their first game of this season, a 1-0 victory over CSKA Sofia, Ludogorets didn't start a single Bulgarian. For a national team that hasn't qualified for a major tournament since Euro 2004, it is difficult to see where the next Stoichkov, Letchkov or Berbatov will come from.

Yet Domuschiev would argue that this situation is not unique to Bulgaria, and that the onus is on Ludogorets' rivals to close the gap.

Which team, if any, can end Ludogorets' dominance?
The run very nearly ended at 11. CSKA Sofia took the 2022-23 title race all the way down to the wire, and would have been crowned champions if they hadn't missed a stoppage-time penalty against arch-rivals CSKA 1948 in their penultimate game. It was agonising for the chasing pack but did, at least, prove that Ludogorets could be caught.

Last campaign was less close, as Ludogorets finished seven points clear of Cherno More. But the latter did end the season strongest, winning four out of their last five games in the Championship round including a 4-0 thumping of the champions.

This season's early front-runners are Levski Sofia, winning their first four games. But having not finished inside the top three since 2018-19, it would be a huge shock if they were able to beat Ludogorets to the title.

What is the biggest rivalry in Bulgarian football right now?
Since 2016, two CSKA Sofia clubs have existed in Bulgarian football: CSKA Sofia and CSKA 1948. Both claim to be the authentic CSKA, but the original club went bankrupt and no longer exists.

It is a dispute that is murky, complicated and invokes strong emotions from both sets of supporters. When the two sides met in last season's Conference League round play-off final, the CSKA Sofia fans were so disgusted at their team trailing 2-0 that ultras stormed the pitch, threatening their own players with metal bars and concrete blocks.

After a 20-minue interruption, the game resumed and CSKA 1948 secured their win and place in Europe. Five people were arrested and CSKA Sofia were forced to play without fans for three games, but the supporters were appeased to a degree: the team's entire coaching staff exited the club after the game, and a number of players were put up for sale.

Fan disorder is not uncommon in Bulgaria, and this was merely the latest incident in a heated rivalry that is quickly displacing CSKA v Levski – AKA Sofia's "Eternal Derby" – as the fiercest in Bulgaria.

What is the biggest problem facing Bulgarian football right now?
The stadiums and football infrastructure in Bulgaria have barely changed in the past 30 or 40 years. Youth academies are not producing enough players, and the most talented ones are denied opportunities by coaches that fear being sacked by impatient owners.

At the end of last year the BFU's long-serving president, former international goalkeeper Borislav Mihaylov, stepped down after failing to deal with a myriad of problems. His replacement Georgi Ivanov, another former international, has plenty to do to help improve the fortunes of Bulgarian football.

Rumen Paytashev

ONE TO WATCH

Bernard TEKPETEY

(Ludogorets Razgrad)

The 26-year-old forward joined Ludogorets from German club Schalke, initially on loan, in 2020 and scored a career-best 15 goals in all competitions last season. He won two Ghana caps in 2017, but as he was younger than 21 at the time he could still switch international allegiance after gaining a Bulgarian passport. An injury sustained in a 2-1 defeat to Qarabag in 2024-25 Champions League qualifying interrupted the start of his season, but also meant a proposed move to Italian club Parma fell through.

Crowd trouble... CSKA Sofia ultras invade the pitch during the 2-0 loss to CSKA 1948 in May

FC BAYERN
MÜNCHEN

GRANDMASTER

How Michael Olise plotted his career like a chess expert

Words: Ryan Baldi

In his 1965 biography of the Princeton college basketball standout – and future US senator – Bill Bradley, legendary *The New Yorker* magazine writer John McPhee described how the star forward possessed a refined appreciation of where he was on the court at all times; a mastery of the angles, a blink-quick calculation of his distance to the basket and a radar-like ability to locate team-mates with perfect passes. The book, which was an extension of an initial magazine article of the same name, was entitled *A Sense of Where You Are*.

It is a description that springs to mind when analysing Michael Olise; Bayern Munich's new €60 million man exhibits a similar physical adroitness – the timing of his infield bursts from the wing, precise acceleration that leaves defenders in his wake, the way he contorts his body at the instant he shoots to expose the extremities of the goal to his strike.

The same can be said of Olise's career trajectory. As a teenager, after his time within Chelsea's youth ranks was ended by "mutual agreement" and a brief stint with Manchester City's academy, he spent a full six months without a club. But at every stage of his journey – from that period of uncertainty, through development-fostering spells with Reading and Crystal Palace and on to his blockbuster move to Bavaria this summer – Olise has had an acute sense of where he was going.

"I've long been convinced that Michael can play for most of the big clubs in the Premier League," says Said Aigoun, who worked with Olise at Palace while serving as Patrick Vieira's assistant manager. "And, of course, also for other big clubs in Europe like Bayern."

Olise has been long convinced, too. He'd joined Chelsea's academy from Arsenal as an eight-year-old. His time on the Cobham conveyor belt ended prematurely at age 14 and was followed by a fruitless trial with Tottenham and a short stay with City. Next, he took a step back in order to take a leap forward by signing for Reading in the second tier.

There was a clearer pathway to the first team with the Championship club. Olise's firm belief that he'd soon be vaulting into the Premier League was evidenced by the fact he and his representatives negotiated for an eminently affordable £8m release clause to be included in his professional contract, easing his eventual top-flight transition.

"He had massive quality in terms of dealing with the ball," says Scott Marshall, who was Reading's Under-23 coach when Olise was coming through at the club. "He had fantastic balance. The way he moved with the ball was superb. And he had a massive will to win.

"He showed as soon as he got around the first-team environment that he thought: 'Well, this is where I belong.' That's when you get an idea that someone could go a long way in the game."

In his first full campaign in the Reading senior side, Olise scored seven goals and provided 12 assists.

He was named the Championship's Young Player of the Season and, when Palace triggered his release clause in the summer of 2021, his Premier League vision was realised.

That wasn't the extent of Olise's foresight, though. Manchester City had tried to acquire him from Reading, but again he valued the greater playing time on offer with Palace. And, again, a release clause was negotiated. Aged just 19 at the time, Olise made a quick impression in south London.

"He's a hard worker, and even when things are difficult he always wants to be the best he can be, which is the mark of great players," Aigoun says. "At every training session, he wants to win everything. In a group, that's what players like in a team-mate. As a coach, you can rely on players like Michael, who has temperament and ambition while ensuring that this is beneficial for the player and the group. Michael has always been irreproachable; he's a calm and clever person."

After four goals and a staggering 16 assists across his first two Premier League campaigns at Selhurst Park, Chelsea made their move to re-sign their ex-academy winger, activating his release clause in the summer of 2023. But Olise stayed put, instead signing an improved contract with Palace – which, once more, included a pre-determined price tag.

A year later, after he'd produced ten goals and six assists in an injury-hit campaign, Chelsea came knocking again. But it was Bayern who won out, making the 23-year-old their fourth-most expensive signing ever.

Olise's pathway to a European giant had been planned with the studied meticulousness of a chess master. It is little surprise then, that Olise likes to fill vacant hours on away trips by beating team-mates on the chess board.

"Outside football, he's a very good chess player," Aigoun says. "He likes to play against partners at the end of the day or on the train during away trips. I can tell you that, just as on the pitch, he plays cleverly and with a desire to win."

He has been equally calculated at international level, too. Although born and raised in London, Olise's Nigerian father and French-Algerian mother opened up a wealth of options when it came to which nation he would represent at youth level. He opted for France and, while he is yet to receive a first senior call-up for *Les Bleus*, he starred for the hosts at this year's Paris Olympics.

"If he was English, he would have already left to play for England," said

Boy wonder... Olise during his first season at Reading

Thierry Henry, coach of the France Under-21s and Olympics team, commending Olise's clear-sighted patience. "He could have made the other choice and played the Euros with the England team, like his team-mate Eberechi Eze at Crystal Palace, but he wants to play for France, knowing that he wouldn't play in the Euros."

A left-footed right-winger with a penchant for cutting inside and curling shots and crosses toward the back post, comparisons with former Bayern great Arjen Robben were inevitable as soon as he joined the Bavarians. And they are merited.

"Michael is a very agile and explosive player with a high level of technical skill in movement," says Aigoun, who spent five years as a coach at Paris Saint-Germain before joining Vieira's Palace staff. "He has a constant desire to provoke opponents with his skills, which makes his game spectacular. As well as the one-v-one situations he loves so much, Michael has a great understanding of the game, he has a feel for situations and makes quick decisions. All of this enables him to unlock situations himself or with his team-mates to create chances. His qualities also make him decisive in delivering key passes, crosses and, of course, scoring goals.

"At Bayern, he will be playing in a league where the attacking game is very open. Michael has already put in some good performances in the Premier League and comes to the Bundesliga with a great deal of experience, maturity and ambition. It's very promising and we hope that the next step will be for him to win the league and the Champions League."

Trademark move... Olise cuts in from the right wing onto his lethal left foot

> "He's the player you want to keep on the pitch until the last second, because at any moment he can be decisive"
>
> **Said Aigoun, Olise's former assistant manager at Crystal Palace**

Robben's success with Bayern – where he won eight Bundesliga titles and the Champions League – was amplified by his tandem with Franck Ribery on the opposite flank. And Olise appears already to have the Ribery to his Robben at the Allianz Arena.

"We played together in the youth team at Chelsea, that was a good time," Bayern superstar Jamal Musiala said of his experience playing alongside Olise in England. "We haven't talked much over the years, but what I can say is that he has a lot of quality. You could see that at Crystal Palace, he scored a lot of goals."

Aigoun points to two key moments in his time working with Olise that prove the London-born forward will thrive at Bayern. The first came in a 2-0 victory over Manchester City at the Etihad in 2021, when Olise twisted John Stones inside out on a breakaway, before playing a one-two with Wilfried Zaha and finding Conor Gallagher in the penalty area to score. The second was against West Ham a little over a year later, when Olise executed a Robben-esque move, stepping inside from the right before finding the far corner to seal a 2-1 away win.

"Tactically, Michael has the qualities to perform well in a dominant style of play with possession of the ball in a high block, and also in attacks with wide and deep spaces, like the move he led at Manchester City," Aigoun says. "He can play from the channel and come into the goal or play directly in the central area.

"He's the player you want to keep on the pitch until the last second, because at any moment he can be decisive – for example, the match at West Ham, where he scored from his favourite position in the 94th minute. I think that tactically, it's important for Michael to be in his preferred positions, in the corner of the box. That's when he feels the sensations that enable him to achieve great things. In fact, that's what he's trying to do himself and the work he does every day after training in the drills set up for the players."

Olympian... Olise shone for France in Paris

Musiala, at age 21, already has four Bundesliga titles under his belt, but he and Olise have a long way to go before they can match the achievements of Robben and Ribery. If Olise's sense of where he's headed remains as keen as it has proven to be so far, trophies by the truckload await.

"It's a great challenge and that's exactly what I was looking for," Olise said upon signing for Bayern. "I want to prove myself at this level and play my part in ensuring that we win as many titles as possible with our team in the coming years."

HAKAN ERICSON

"Our players are a lot better than people realise"

As the Faroe Islands prepare for their second campaign in the third tier of the UEFA Nations League – taking on a group featuring Armenia, Latvia and North Macedonia – their experienced Swedish manager sits down with *World Soccer* to discuss his team's progress

You've worked in football for more than 40 years – what is your impression of the Faroes?
I have been really impressed from the start with the football federation here. They have the right structure in place, the people are hardworking and if they say they are going to do something, they do it. And remember, many of the players playing in the Faroes have jobs too. When they have training, they have to fit that around their schedule, and when domestic teams play in Europe [current champions Klaksvik Sports Club made it to the UEFA Conference League group stage last season], many players will be back at work at seven the next morning.

How important has the UEFA Nations League been for the development of countries like the Faroe Islands?
Maybe I didn't fully appreciate how important it was before I became Faroe Islands manager, but I do now, particularly when you consider the global pandemic – after November 2019, we didn't play again until September the following year. This tournament allows us to play relatively equally matched opponents and to play regularly to continue further development. For us, winning the group in the Nations League [in 2020-21] and remaining unbeaten against Malta, Latvia and Andorra was significant.

As you mentioned, the Faroes topped their 2020-21 UEFA Nations League D group, finishing with 12 points, gaining promotion to League C and then getting a famous 2-1 victory over Turkey. Is that your greatest performance?
That was great. But of course, we had already won the group and it was cold and the wind was blowing, and the rain was coming down and maybe that played into our hands. But it was a very satisfying result.

There were parts of other performances that were also very good: in the World Cup qualifiers for Qatar, we held Denmark to 0-0 up until five minutes from time. We ended up losing 1-0. Then last year, in the Euro 2024 qualifiers, we were level 0-0 in Poland until Lewandowski scored a penalty with around 15 minutes to go. In the end, we lost that 2-0, but these were other good performances against bigger, more established nations.

The Faroes have won 36 games of the 243 they have played since 1988 and you have managed the country to nine of those wins, effectively 25 per cent of their victories, in just five years. How have you helped them progress?
Belief is a big part. You must have self-belief otherwise it really is impossible to achieve your goals, so that is one area we have worked on. Bringing in more support staff, mental training was one area, enabling players to speed up decision-making. We have an experienced physio team and we brought in a video analyst, something the country didn't have before.

The country doesn't have so many references of how it has succeeded footballing-wise in the past, which can be difficult when you want to progress. It's also been important for us to be braver on the ball and in our decision-making. In those games against Denmark and Poland, the matches were close, but those opponents were better in the high-intensity moments. The players are committed to what we are trying to do, to get more control of the ball. We have to go forward, but create space when doing so and for our defence to get up and defend outside the box.

Currently, there are Faroe Islands national team players in Iceland, as well as leagues in Denmark, Poland, Republic of Ireland and North Macedonia. What is the challenge for their fellow countrymen getting such opportunities?
Yes, we also have two playing first division-football in Norway with Fredrikstad [Joannes Bjartalid and Brandur Hendriksson]. The biggest challenge is that not so many scouts know enough about the Faroe Islands and the national league. Maybe they are a bit afraid to recommend a player from the country because of what they think clubs might say, but I tell scouts and clubs: 'Why not have a look at our players?' They are a lot better than people realise, with the technical quality of the players being good, so that isn't an issue. While we do have some players playing abroad, I think it would be beneficial for football in the country if more did.

Interview by Mark Sanderson

The AFC Champions League started in 2003 and was won by Al Ain. The team from the United Arab Emirates also claimed the latest edition back in May but much else has changed over the intervening 21 years.

The first competition featured four groups of four but the last one saw 40 teams divided ten ways. It was felt by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) that involving more and more countries and clubs would help increase the tournament's profile, popularity, appeal and its revenue-gathering capability. The schedule was also changed, with the most recent competition running from autumn to spring, like Europe, a move away from the traditional spring to autumn.

Now though, the tweaking has stopped and from September, fans will see a genuine revamp. The AFC Champions League Elite will kick-off and, as the name suggests, it has been streamlined to include only the very best. There are now just 24 teams from the 12 associations (down from 23) with the highest club coefficients. There will be 30 more clubs from over

TOTAL REVAMP

Asia's continental club competitions have undergone an overhaul for 2024-25, as John Duerden explains…

Asian champions… Al Ain celebrate on their way to winning last season's AFC Champions League

20 nations in the AFC Champions League Two and then there is a third competition, the AFC Challenge League, which is reserved for developing nations. The names may not exactly be inspiring but the hope is that this will be a new and exciting beginning.

"The tapestry of Asian football is rich and unique, backed by the millions of passionate fans, and brimming with endless possibilities and unlimited potential – which have been captured in the new brands that will breathe fresh life into the competitions," AFC president Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa said. "These landmark revamps reinforce the AFC's ambitions."

Salman hopes that more exclusivity means higher standards and a more marketable product. That remains to be seen, as does the success of the new format.

Instead of multiple groups of four, there are two groups of 12 – one in the western zone and the other in the east. Each team will play eight games against different opponents from their group in a Swiss-system format rather than round robin, with the top eight from each group going through to the last 16.

There still does not seem to be much general awareness around the continent of the changes, and authorities will be hoping that supporters quickly take to the new format.

While teams from east and west will be able to meet from the quarter-final stage – which has generally been welcomed as they were hitherto kept apart until the final – there is some disquiet. From the quarter-finals onwards, all games will take place in one venue. For the first two years, this will be Saudi Arabia, and if all goes well, the Kingdom will be given the next three. Not only does the Saudi Pro League have the continent's richest clubs, they will also have home advantage.

Aside from concerns in the east that western nations such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar are getting the lion's share of tournaments (the 2019, 2023 and 2027 Asian Cups were hosted by the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and the latter two have the 2024 and 2026 Under-23 Asian Cups as well as the 2022 and 2034 World Cups) there is a risk of anti-climax. Asian club football does not have a culture of fans travelling in large numbers to neutral venues. Two-legged finals played home and away have resulted over the years in huge crowds and great atmospheres. There is a risk of many matches taking place in half-empty, at best, stadiums and a bad look for the showpiece games.

Record winners... Al Hilal have won the AFC Champions League four times

The AFC have offered more money to sweeten the deal. There have been complaints in the past that the tournament is not lucrative enough, especially with the huge costs involved in travelling around the world's biggest continent. The prize money has tripled for the winners from $4 million to $12m. For most clubs in Asia, such sums would make a huge difference.

THE SECOND AND THIRD TIERS

Winning the AFC Champions League Two will net $3.28m. This tournament takes over from the AFC Cup, which had been reserved for developing nations. It became a harder sell for the general Asian public as it was divided into different regions (west, south, central, east and southeast) with a format that was not easy to follow.

Now, there are 23 countries involved – 12 from the west and 11 from the east – with the likes of Japan, South Korea, Iran and Saudi Arabia each having a representative to compete with teams much further down the coefficient rankings from the likes of Kuwait, Turkmenistan and the Philippines.

The question is: how will fans and media from the top nations, who have always been accustomed to being in the main tournament, react to being in the

Knockout round hosts ...the quarter-final stage onwards will be played in Saudi Arabia

second tier? The AFC hopes it will be seen like UEFA's Europa League: exciting for most and, even for those disappointed to miss out on the main event, a worthwhile chance to win a continental trophy.

Asia likes to follow Europe in terms of continental competitions and, echoing the introduction of the UEFA Conference League, there is now a third tier: the AFC Challenge League, which does not feature the top countries at all and offers opportunities to clubs from Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Laos and other lower-ranked associations.

ON THE PITCH

While there are major changes to the format of the new Elite tournament, it will feel familiar when it all kicks off. In the eastern zone, Japan and South Korea have the maximum three representatives.

Vissel Kobe may not have Andres Iniesta any more but finally got their first J. League title in 2023 and the club, which has long had Asian ambitions, will be flying the flag for Japan. Kawasaki Frontale have had sustained success at home but have struggled to replicate that in Asia, while Yokohama F. Marinos lost the Asian final in May to Al Ain. Since then, however, the club fired Harry Kewell as coach after poor domestic results.

Over in South Korea, Ulsan HD, winners in 2012 and 2020, have also lost their coach, but Hong Myung-bo was poached by the national team. The Tigers will be one of the favourites and regional rivals Pohang Steelers, with three continental championships to their name, will also be looking to challenge once more. Gwangju FC are making their debut appearance.

Fittingly, China are represented by the two Shanghai teams, Port and Shenhua, who have been going very well domestically. Shanghai Port are coached by Kevin Muscat and the Australian's reputation as one of Asia's top coaches will go through the roof if he can take the Red Eagles all the way. Shenhua have former Russia boss Leonid Slutsky in charge. Chinese football has had a tough few years, but the two teams from the country's biggest city are clearly the best two teams in China.

Australia have struggled to make much of an impact in the Champions League in recent years meaning that they are allowed just one team. Central Coast Mariners have recent continental success, however, winning the AFC Cup in May. This will be a step up in quality but a welcome one.

> "The tapestry of Asian football is rich and unique, backed by the millions of passionate fans, and brimming with endless possibilities"
>
> **AFC president Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa**

The Southeast Asian challenge will come from Thailand and Malaysia. A Thai team made the final of the first-ever Champions League, and record ten-time domestic title-winners Buriram United would certainly settle for that. Johor Darul Ta'zim have been even more dominant in Malaysia than Buriram have been in Thailand. With only four being eliminated, there is a real chance for all to dream of the knockout stages.

There they may meet a team from the west. Defending champions Al Ain defeated Saudi Arabian giants Al Nassr and Al Hilal in the quarter-final and semi-final last season. More focus will still be on the big Saudi teams especially as they will, if they reach the last eight, play the rest of the games on home soil.

Al Hilal are the most successful team in Asia with four titles. The Riyadh giants strolled to the domestic title, setting a new world-record winning streak of 34 games along the way, and with Neymar back fit will be the team to beat.

Al Nassr will not be far behind and are desperate for a first Champions League title, and the AFC wouldn't mind Cristiano Ronaldo going all the way. The third team are Al Ahli. The Jeddah giants may have lost Allan Saint-Maximin to Fenerbahce, but still have the likes of Riyad Mahrez and Roberto Firmino.

As well as Al Ain, there should be challenges from Al Sadd, champions in 2011 and reigning Qatari champions, as well as the league's runners-up Al Rayyan.

Iran are still waiting for a first Champions League success but will have their two biggest teams in the group stage in the form of Tehran giants Persepolis and Esteghlal.

There is one representative from Iraq in Al Shorta while Central Asia have only Pakhtakor, an Uzbekistan team with a wealth of continental experience but who have never quite managed to go all the way.

As for the AFC Champions League Two, there are some big names in the form of Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors from South Korea, though the two-time Asian champions are struggling at home this season (see more on page 20). Japan's Sanfrecce Hiroshima will fancy their chances of a first Asian trophy, as will Australia' Sydney FC and Saudi Arabia's representatives Al Taawoun. It may need an historic club from a smaller nation such as Mohun Bagan of India or Malaysia's Selangor to grab the headlines and provide some romance.

Turn to page 114 for the full list of teams in all three competitions as well as the qualifying results.

Second-tier champions ...Australia's Central Coast Mariners won the 2023-24 AFC Cup

AFC president... Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa

Glenn Moore

Halfway along the road to Switzerland

Eight of the 16 teams secured their spots for Euro 2025 in qualifying, with play-offs to come

The congestion crisis overwhelming the women's football calendar came to a head as direct qualification to the 2025 European Championship concluded.

The final two rounds of fixtures were played in mid-July, either side of the men's European Championship final. This was nearly two months after the domestic leagues of England, Germany, France and Italy and many others had concluded, and barely a week before the Olympic football programme began.

Those teams not at the Olympics – excluding the players from summer leagues such as in Scandinavia – should have been on a beach, or somewhere similarly relaxing, to recover mentally and physically from another demanding season. The players and coaches of France, Germany and Spain, meanwhile, should have been working through a build-up programme designed to return their squads to peak fitness just in time for the Olympics.

Instead, France were in Ireland, Germany in Iceland and Spain the Czech Republic. As it happened all three had wrapped up qualification before these fixtures, so could ease off (they all lost, when they would normally be expected to win) but that was fortuitous, and these were still not trips the coaches welcomed so close to the Games.

As for those players who should have been recharging, the true cost will not be known until next season resumes which, in the case of players needing to prepare for Champions League qualifiers at the start of September, will have been all too soon.

As it is, Lena Oberdorf suffered a knee injury that put her out of the Olympics, and possibly next summer's Euros, during Germany's second match of the round, against Austria. Given Germany's Games participation, they may have played each other anyway, but it would have been a friendly of lower intensity.

The injury came a week after Oberdorf joined Bayern Munich from Wolfsburg, but she will now spend most of her first season in Bavaria on the sidelines.

Unsurprisingly, with many players below optimum fitness, there were some dull games along with the surprise results – England, for example, laboured to a 2-1 win over Ireland then ground out a 0-0 draw in Sweden. It ensured the defending champions secured qualification behind France at Sweden's expense, although coach Sarina Wiegman conceded their attacking play "is something that we absolutely have to improve."

Earning direct qualification along with England, France, Germany and Spain were Italy, Netherlands, Denmark and Iceland. Switzerland have a place as hosts and will be seeded along with (coincidentally) the three Olympic competitors.

Some strong sides found themselves heading into the play-offs, which will run over two rounds from late October to early December. Sweden, finalists at the Olympics in 2021 and semi-finalists at the 2019 and 2023 World Cups and 2022 Euros, are the most notable, closely followed by a Norwegian side that continues to underperform.

> With many players below optimum fitness, there were some dull games along with the surprise results

Spot secured...Jenni Hermoso scored three goals as Spain won five out of six games to reach Euro 2025

They were edged out in the highly competitive Group A1. Going into the July fixtures Netherlands (seven points) had the edge over Norway and Italy (both five) but had already played both their ties against the weakest team, Finland (four).

Norway were then held to a draw by a 98th-minute equaliser in Finland by Milan midfielder Emma Koivisto. Italy subsequently took a point from the Dutch in Sittard before thrashing the Finns 4-0.

That left Norway needing to defeat Netherlands in Bergen, and they were on course to do so when Caroline Graham Hansen scored after an hour. But with ten minutes left Vivianne Miedema levelled to secure second place for the Dutch and send Norway into the two-stage play-offs.

In the initial phase, eight League A teams (qualification uses the Nations League format) play League C nations while the 12 League B countries will contest six ties. The 14 winners then play a seeded second round to produce the final seven qualifiers.

In Norway's case that means Albania then, assuming they win the first tie, Croatia or Northern Ireland. Sweden's path is Luxembourg, then Bosnia & Herzegovina or Serbia.

All to play for...Euro 2022 semi-finalists Sweden will face Luxembourg in the play-offs first round

PLAY-OFF DRAW

Azerbaijan/Portugal v Belarus/Czech Republic
Hungary/Scotland v Montenegro/Finland
Turkey/Ukraine v Greece/Belgium
Slovakia/Wales v Georgia/Republic of Ireland
Romania/Poland v Slovenia/Austria
Croatia/Northern Ireland v Albania/Norway
Bosnia & Herzegovina/Serbia v Luxembourg/Sweden

The first round will be played between October 23 and 29 and the second round between November 22 and December 3

Round-up

TOUGH DRAW FOR ARSENAL

The Champions League first qualifying round draw threw up an Anglo-Spanish clash with either Arsenal or Atletico Madrid certain to go out at this early hurdle – assuming they beat Scottish champions Rangers and Norwegians Rosenborg respectively in the first stage.

In all, 59 teams compete in this opening stage of mini-tournaments to be played on September 4 and 7. The 15 winners join nine other clubs in round two, including last year's semi-finalists Paris Saint-Germain, plus Real Madrid, Manchester City and Juventus. Twelve will progress to the group stage joining automatic qualifiers Barcelona, Lyon, Bayern Munich and Chelsea.

Last season Arsenal went out to Paris FC at the initial stage, while the previous two seasons saw Manchester City knocked out in qualifying by Real Madrid.

Tough draw...Arsenal could face Atletico Madrid in the women's UEFA Champions League qualifiers

ANGEL CITY'S RECORD PRICE TAG

Angel City have accepted a bid from Disney CEO Bob Iger and his wife Willow Bay valuing the club at $250m (£192.3m), making it the world's most valuable women's sport team.

The Los Angeles franchise is the fourth National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) club to be sold this year. Fellow 2022 expansion club San Diego Wave went for $120m, Portland Thorns for $63m and Seattle Reign for $60m with MLS club Seattle Sounders involved in the latter deal.

NEW LEAGUE LAUNCHES IN US

The USL Super League, a rival top-tier league to the NWSL in the United States, kicked off in mid-August with eight teams. Tampa Bay Sun are the favourites with a roster that includes ex-internationals Erika Tymrak (US), Jade Moore (England), Jordyn Listro (Canada) and Andrea Hauksdottir (Iceland) plus Natasha Flint (former Liverpool and Manchester City) and the experienced Brooke Hendrix (ex-Reading).

Other notable recruits to the league include former England international Chioma Ubogagu, US cap Amber Brooks (both Dallas Trinity), Panama's Riley Tanner (Spokane Zephyr) and Cameroon's Grace Ngock (D.C. Power).

Brooklyn FC, Carolina Ascent, Fort Lauderdale United and Lexington SC make up the octet.

Sold...Angel City FC

SAN DIEGO WAVE GOODBYE TO SHOCKED STONEY

San Diego Wave unexpectedly sacked Casey Stoney, who'd led the expansion club to the 2023 NWSL Shield in only their second campaign. Utah Royals axed rookie coach Amy Rodriguez, leaving Racing Louisville's Bev Yanez as the last former player working as a head coach in the league.

Sacked... Casey Stoney

SIX JOIN NEW CANADIAN LEAGUE

The line-up for Canada's first professional women's league has been confirmed, with six cities fielding teams for the April 2025 launch. The Northern Super League will span the nation with teams from Halifax on the east coast to Vancouver in the west – a six-hour, 2,700-mile flight.

Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto provide a relatively close cluster of teams and Calgary represents the mid-West. The most obvious absence is Edmonton, which hosted a World Cup semi-final in 2015.

The league will feature a 25-game regular season followed by play-offs.

TRANSFER WINDOW LATEST

Some early WSL deals included Arsenal snapping up Spain forward Mariona Caldentey from Barcelona and Liverpool breaking their transfer record to sign Canadian teenager Olivia Smith from Sporting. Read more in our 2024-25 season preview in October's edition.

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World Service

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INCLUDING Global diary

TIM VICKERY — 88
South American 2026 World Cup qualifiers

STEVE MENARY — 98, 100
Caribbean Club Shield & Europeada

SAMINDRA KUNTI — 84
Men's Olympics

GLENN MOORE — 84
Women's Olympics

JOHN DUERDEN — 90
Asian 2026 World Cup qualifiers

JAMES NALTON — 94
CONCACAF Nations League

NICK BIDWELL — 92
UEFA Nations League

MARK GLEESON — 96
AFCON 2025 qualifiers

102

PLUS

2024-25 fixtures ...Premier League, Serie A, La Liga, Bundesliga and Ligue 1

NEWS

84 2024 Paris Olympics: men's tournament
86 2024 Paris Olympics: women's tournament
88 South American 2026 World Cup qualifiers
90 Asian 2026 World Cup qualifiers
92 2024-25 UEFA Nations League
94 2024-25 CONCACAF Nations League
96 AFCON 2025 qualifiers
98 Caribbean Club Shield
100 Europeada 2024

DIARY

101 Global diary

RESULTS, TABLES, FIXTURES

102 2024-25 European league fixtures
112 Internationals
113 Club football

84

2024 Paris Olympics...men and women's tournaments

France

SAMINDRA KUNTI

Glorious Spanish summer continues

Spain add a gold medal to their Euro 2024 and Euro Under-19 trophies, although doubts hang over football's place at the Olympics

In many ways, substitute Sergio Camello's extra-time goals that steered his side to Olympic gold were the crowning achievement of Spain's outstanding summer. In the space of 57 days, the Spanish won Euro 2024, the Under-19 European Championship and the Olympic football tournament, confirming, with aplomb, that they are the *futbol* nation. At the three tournaments, Spain were not just the winners, but simply the best.

At a sun-drenched Parc des Princes in Paris, in the full glow of a mesmerising Olympic summer, France and their coach Thierry Henry found that out the hard way – they had clawed their way back into the final from 3-1 down after Spain's first-half blitz with three goals inside 11 minutes, but Camello's two dinks, a combination of skill, precision and timing, were decisive in the 100th and 121st minute. The French had to settle for silver, a colour that did little for the host nation in the medal table.

Even so, the crowd roared in appreciation of the achievements of Henry and his side. Speaking of a sense of national unity the Olympic Games harnessed in fractured socio-political times, Henry, on the eve of the final, said: "We have a beautiful country

Silver medallists...France coach Thierry Henry leads his players in acknowledging the home support

Gold medallists ...Spain players celebrate after Sergio Camello's extra-time winner in the final

after all. When we decide to be together, we are unstoppable whatever the outcome of the competition."

On the surface, the second-place finish redeemed Henry's managerial career after a chequered track record including failed spells at both Monaco – where he lasted just 104 days – and Montreal. It could tempt the French FA to promote the 47-year-old when Didier Deschamps does eventually move on.

At the same time, the Olympic tournament is too makeshift to attach much importance to Henry's silver medal. A rarity in international football, he had time to work with his team yet did not have all the players he wanted; Kylian Mbappe and other stars were not released by their clubs because the Olympic tournament falls outside of FIFA's international match calendar.

Instead, *Les Bleuets* featured a host of fringe players. Alexandre Lacazette, once of Arsenal, enjoyed the most name recognition, closely followed by Michael Olise, fresh from his move from Crystal Palace to Bayern Munich. Jean-Philippe Mateta, Loic Bade, Adrien Truffert and Joris Chottard became household names during the tournament, but France failed to convince in the group stage and rode their luck in the knockout phase. Too often, the team appeared disjointed.

And that's the problem with the entire tournament: a sideshow in cities removed from the epicentre of the Olympic Games with players that neither speak to the imagination nor always match the standards of elite international football. In a 17-day obsession with Leon Marchand and Simone Biles, football once again seemed irrelevant.

That did not prevent the sport from making the headlines. On the opening day, Morocco v Argentina was suspended for nearly two hours after Moroccan supporters invaded the pitch following a late, late equaliser from their opponents following a passage of play that resembled pinball more than football. After the restart – to play out the final minutes of stoppage time – it was announced that Argentina's equaliser had been ruled out by VAR leading to a 2-1 defeat and complaints by coach Javier Mascherano, who branded the scenes as "pathetic" and "a circus".

> **In a 17-day obsession with Leon Marchand and Simone Biles, football once again seemed irrelevant**

Amid a Games-time force of up to 45,000 police and gendarme, backed up by a 10,000-strong contingent of soldiers, the largest military camp in the French capital since World War II, Israel enjoyed major security protection. They participated for the third time in the tournament after FIFA, in the days leading up to kick-off, postponed the assessment by an "independent legal panel" over Palestine's demand that Israel be suspended and banned from the world game.

As the first Israeli participants at the Games, the football team rolled up at the Parc des Princes for their curtain raiser against Mali with a heavy security blanket that included dozens of police vans and officers on motorcycles in a major show of force by French organisers, but they could not prevent the Israeli anthem from being booed. Security did remove spectators with "Free Palestine" shirts. Ultimately, Israel played just a small part in the tournament, exiting in the first round bottom of Group D with a single point.

In the quarter-finals, the French eliminated Argentina 1-0 in another grudge match, Spain cruised past Japan 3-0 and Morocco thrashed the United States 4-0. On the back of a great 2022 World Cup but disappointing Africa Cup of Nations in January, the North Africans became the tournament sensation with their passionate fans. Morocco claimed bronze for the first time with a 6-0 win against Egypt.

The final saw the first all-European clash since Barcelona 1992, a game that also featured Spain. This time however the hosts had to make do with silver, as Henry's stardust and a wave of French togetherness proved insufficient to prevent the Spaniards claiming their second gold medal 32 years after the first. This summer, they simply couldn't stop winning.

"We had a dream, this gold is the best that an athlete can aspire to," said coach Santi Denia. "An Olympic gold is the greatest, you can see how beautiful it is and the tears it brings."

Bronze medallists... Morocco's Soufiane Rahimi (R) was the tournament's top scorer with eight

France

GLENN MOORE

Review

Gold for USA

In Emma Hayes' first tournament as head coach, the United States win the Women's Olympics tournament

Gold medallists... United States' Mallory Swanson scores the winner in the final against Brazil

Twelve months after they had each suffered their worst World Cup performances, the United States, Brazil and Germany took the medals at the Paris 2024 Olympic Games.

In a result that highlighted both how evenly-matched the elite end of the sport now is, and how the established powers are never down for long, the trio were delighted with gold, silver and bronze respectively after going in with low expectations following a year of change – both of coaches and players.

Not so world champions Spain who left empty-handed, admitting they did not play at their best. A year of achievement and turmoil had finally caught up with them, mentally and physically.

They were not the only players running on fumes and memory by the end. The tight schedule meant the finalists played six matches in 17 days, or 16 for the beaten semi-finalists.

"I think all the teams at this point are physically shot," said USA forward Trinity Rodman before the final. "A quite exhausting tournament", said Brazil's Adriana after it. Future competitions need to consider, at the very least, scrapping extra-time.

In such circumstances, a USA team would always be strong contenders. Not only are their players noted for their athleticism, the NWSL was in mid-season whereas squads dominated by European-based players were coming off the back of a long campaign.

Nevertheless, Emma Hayes had only been in the post two months after leading Chelsea to the WSL title. As well as adding youth, she forged a change of mentality, bringing the "joy" back to a squad that was bruised after the World Cup.

That was also the theme for Germany's interim coach Horst Hrubesch and Brazil's Arthur Elias.

Silver medallists...Brazil players celebrate beating Spain 4-2 in the semi-finals in Marseille

All three teams looked renewed, by young legs and fresh minds, and in such an intense tournament that proved crucial.

In contrast, Spain's players were jaded while the French – unlike so many of the host nation's athletes who were inspired by fervent support – crumbled under the weight of expectation.

They had begun in electric fashion, taking a 3-0 lead over Colombia before half-time with Marie-Antoinette Katoto scoring twice (she would finish with five, and the Golden Boot). But French fragility was soon in evidence as Colombia struck twice in the second period to leave Herve Renard's team hanging on.

The drama, however, surrounded Group A's other opening game after Canada were revealed to have used drones to spy on New Zealand's training. The ensuing furore resulted in coach Bev Priestman, who initially denied all knowledge but was later implicated, being suspended for a year and the team docked six points. Further repercussions are likely.

However, the Tokyo winners do not lack for resilience. They beat New Zealand 2-1 and then stunned France with a winner in the 102nd minute from Vanessa Gilles.

An edgy 2-1 win over New Zealand ensured France topped the group but any sense of destiny was gone. Canada meanwhile made it three wins from three by beating Colombia who qualified as a best-two third-place finisher.

In Group B, USA clocked up three comfortable victories and Germany a pair of them leaving the key qualification match Australia v Zambia in Nice. In an extraordinary encounter, Zambia led 5-2 with Barbra Banda scoring her third Olympic hat-trick, only for the Matildas to win 6-5, including a 90th-minute goal from Michelle Heyman.

It was not enough. Australia missed out on the other third-place spot, pipped on goal difference by a single goal, as Brazil's sole Group C victory – over Nigeria – took them through behind Spain and Japan.

Come the knockout stages Brazil found their mojo. Though Marta was suspended, Arthur Elias' young side played with panache and nous in beating France and then Spain. After the impressive goalkeeper Lorena saved a first-half penalty from Sakina Karchaoui, Gabi Portilho scored the game's only goal to put out the hosts. They then counter-attacked superbly to defeat the World Cup holders 4-2.

Meanwhile the United States secured successive 1-0 extra-time wins to see off a disappointingly passive Japanese side and a German one that opted, after their 3-0 group-stage loss, for a more cautious approach.

Germany and Spain – who had come from 2-0 down to beat Colombia on penalties in the quarter-finals – then went to Lyon for a third-place match with the bronze medal at stake.

Ann-Katrin Berger, who had saved two penalties and scored one in Germany's shootout defeat of Canada, was the hero again, saving a spot-kick from Alexia Putellas in the eighth and final minute of added time. That preserved a slender lead provided by another penalty, won and converted by Giulia Gwinn.

Fourth on their Olympic debut was in theory a creditable result for Spain, but not given their current status.

"We are a winning team so we wanted more," Aitana Bonmati said afterwards. "We are going home without any medals so it is a bad result for us. We have to correct the mistakes and go for more."

The following day in Paris, which consistently had the best attendances, another 40,000 at Parc des Princes saw Brazil make the early running but fail to take their chances. Just before the hour mark, Mallory Swanson, on her 100th cap, took hers. USA held on for a fifth gold medal in eight tournaments.

Both coaches spoke afterwards of how their tournament had set them up for the 2027 World Cup, to be hosted by Brazil.

"We showed Brazilian football is strong and we rose to a new level," said Elias.

"We're delighted with gold but we want so much more," added Hayes. "I'm so excited by our potential." A year from their debacle in Australia, the United States are well and truly back.

Hayes had only been in the post two months after leading Chelsea to the WSL title. As well as adding youth, she forged a change of mentality

Bronze medallists ...Giulia Gwinn (R) celebrates scoring for Germany

South America

TIM VICKERY

2026 World Cup qualifying resumes

Plenty has changed since the opening rounds of qualifying last autumn

Chasing history...can in-form striker Salomon Rondon fire Venezuela to their first-ever World Cup?

With six rounds of matches coming up in the next few months, by the middle of November South America's marathon World Cup qualification campaign will be two thirds complete.

The first third was crammed in between last September and November – the shortest-ever gap between the end of one World Cup cycle and the start of another. Going into the campaign, only world champions Argentina had played a competitive game under their coach, and it showed: the teams looked extremely raw, and Argentina sit at the top of the table.

Since then, of course, there has been a Copa America, meaning that teams have had time to get together and work on the training ground. In theory, this should make a substantial difference; in practice, this might not entirely be the case. So many sides still seem to be starting from scratch.

After that first third of the qualifiers, five countries – the entire bottom half of the table – made a change of coach. As a consequence of the Copa, three more lost their jobs: Paraguay and Bolivia sacked their second coach of the campaign, and Ecuador joined them. This might well come as a surprise. Ecuador appear well on course to book a place in 2026 and in the Copa, after a disappointing group phase, came very close to causing a major shock in the quarter-finals before going out to Argentina on penalties. But in a demanding environment, Felix Sanchez was always on thin ice. Many had disagreed with his appointment and were gunning for him. New coach, 43-year-old Sebastian Beccacece, who has experience of coaching in Argentina and Spain, has much to prove. Oscar Villegas, who has been around the club circuit in Bolivia has been appointed by *La Verde*, while Paraguay are hurriedly searching for a replacement in time to call up their squad for the September matches.

On the evidence of the Copa, none of the other teams that had gone through a change of coach – Brazil, Chile or Peru – appeared to derive much benefit from the switch. Indeed, it was striking how much the results in the Copa tended to bear out the qualification campaign after six rounds – the table shows Argentina top, followed by Uruguay, Colombia and Venezuela, a near reflection of the order of events in the USA.

But even some of these teams face questions. In the case of Argentina, there is the pending issue of how long Lionel Messi can or is willing to keep going. Colombia have to respond to the disappointment of defeat in the final of the Copa and the loss of their long unbeaten run. And when Uruguay ran out of momentum in the Copa was this just the dynamic of a tournament or a symptom of something more substantial?

Venezuela, meanwhile, will have to deal with the prospect, sometimes hard to handle, of being close to an historic achievement. They are the only South American nation never to have played in a World Cup, and their time would seem to have come – but can they cope?

The other way in which the Copa reinforced the evidence of last year's qualifiers was in the problems scoring goals. After those six rounds, Uruguay are out in front with 13, with Argentina and Brazil on eight. No one else has more than a goal a game, while Paraguay and Peru have one each.

That is one more than Peru managed in the Copa America, and Chile also drew a blank. A lack of firepower seems to be a general problem among the current crop of South American national teams. There is, of course, plenty of time to build on the way to the next World Cup, but the level of play so far has not been high.

> **In the case of Argentina, there is the pending issue of how long Lionel Messi can or is willing to keep going**

Even so, there is plenty of incentive. The expansion of the World Cup means that six of the continent's ten nations will qualify automatically, with the

Update

Solid start... Uruguay beat Brazil at home in qualifying last year

seventh having the chance to secure a place through a play-off. This means that no one is yet entirely out of the race. Bolivia, for example, have managed just one win amid five defeats, but if they can find form at home, at the extreme altitude of La Paz, then they can become contenders. They are unlikely to pick up too many points on the road, but if they can take advantage of home matches this year against Venezuela, Colombia and Paraguay then theirs is not yet a lost cause.

The highlights over the next few months promise to be repeats of two matches from the knockout stages of the Copa America. In September Colombia are at home to Argentina, looking to avenge that 1-0 defeat in the chaos of Miami. And in November Brazil are at home to Uruguay, who knocked them out of the Copa on penalties and won an emphatic 2-0 victory in Montevideo last year.

Leaders...Argentina went top with a victory in Rio last November

CURRENT STANDINGS

	Team	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
1	Argentina	6	5	0	1	8	2	15
2	Uruguay	6	4	1	1	13	5	13
3	Colombia	6	3	3	0	6	3	12
4	Venezuela	6	2	3	1	6	3	9
5	Ecuador*	6	3	2	1	5	3	8
6	Brazil	6	2	1	3	8	7	7
7	Paraguay	6	1	2	3	1	3	5
8	Chile	6	1	2	3	3	7	5
9	Bolivia	6	1	0	5	4	14	3
10	Peru	6	0	2	4	1	8	2

*Deducted 3 points

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

Asian underdogs eye World Cup prize

With extra qualifying spots available, Asia's usual suspects could be joined by some new faces in North America in 2026

Asia's 2026 World Cup qualification campaign gets serious in September, with just 18 teams from the 46 that started out last year still in the race for eight automatic spots.

Those that finish in the top two of the three groups of six will get their North American tickets. The six teams that finish third and fourth will progress to another stage of qualification to fight it out for two more places.

Despite the changes, there is still a familiar feel to much of it – especially in Group C where, for the third time running, Japan, Australia and Saudi Arabia are drawn together. All three made it in 2018 and 2022 with Japan and Saudi Arabia finishing in the top two and Australia third – leaving the Socceroos having to go through the play-off route.

Japan are again strong favourites for top, likely leaving the other two to fight for second. There is pressure on Roberto Mancini in Saudi Arabia; the Italian has yet to really make his mark, with the biggest headlines created by player unrest and his departure from the pitch before a penalty shootout against South Korea at the Asian Cup in January had even finished. Despite the toughness of the draw, Australia are relieved that there is less travelling compared to past campaigns, such as the world-record setting 250,000km-plus covered on the road to Russia.

On a high...Jordan are looking to build on their Asian Cup silver medal

Indonesia is as close as it gets for the Aussies but thoughts should be spared for Team Garuda. Getting to this stage for the first time, helped by sustained naturalisation of eligible European-based players, has been rewarded with the toughest group. China are just lucky to be here at all and few of the 1.4 billion living in the Middle Kingdom expect a top-two finish.

As one of the final two names still in the hat, South Korea breathed a sigh of relief as Japan got Group C while the Taegeuk Warriors, chasing an 11th successive World Cup appearance, landed in Group B. All five opponents are West Asian and while there are going to be some tough travel turnarounds, home form should see them through especially as the other five will take points off each other.

One thing is for sure: at least one of Iraq, Jordan, Oman, Palestine and Kuwait will be at the 2026 World Cup. Iraq feel confident of returning to the global stage for the first time since 1986. A squad that has talent needs to show that it can be matched by an ability to deliver under pressure. Jordan are fresh from reaching the final of the Asian Cup in February, famously defeating – and outplaying – the South Koreans in the semi-finals. The team may have been the story of the tournament but recently saw their coach Hussein Ammouta leave to take over United Arab Emirates club Al Jazira. Given what the Moroccan achieved in little time in Amman, it is a big loss.

Palestine are here for the first time and kick-off with a first-ever meeting against South Korea. Few think that the team, well-organised and determined, will finish in the top two. They are, however, more than capable of getting results against the likes of Oman, who came close to qualification in 2022 but were disappointing at January's Asian Cup, and a Kuwait team that took advantage of India's stumbles to squeeze through at the last minute.

Key man...Akram Afif fired Qatar to Asian Cup glory back in February

One thing is for sure: at least one of Iraq, Jordan, Oman, Palestine and Kuwait will be at the 2026 World Cup

Group A may be a lot tougher than it looks at first glance. Iran will be expected to make a fourth successive World Cup finals appearance even if they have yet to really impress under head coach Amir Ghalenoei. Qatar are continental champions after February's Asian Cup victory on home soil, but the Maroons have still never successfully completed a World Cup qualifying campaign and are keen to change that.

That is also Uzbekistan's holy grail. The White Wolves are known as the continent's chokers after getting close to past tournaments but failing when the pressure was on. The expanded allocation should make a big difference but even that is likely to help their Central Asian neighbours Kyrgyzstan. The United Arab Emirates made it in 1990 and look to have improved under Paulo Bento.

It's hard to say the same of North Korea but the 1966 quarter-finalists can always make it difficult for someone – whether it is themselves or the opposition. Still, with twice as many spots available as has been on offer in the past, anything could happen.

Underdogs... Indonesia are aiming to reach their first World Cup finals

THE DRAW

GROUP A

- Iran
- Qatar
- Uzbekistan
- United Arab Emirates
- Kyrgyzstan
- North Korea

GROUP B

- South Korea
- Iraq
- Jordan
- Oman
- Palestine
- Kuwait

GROUP C

- Japan
- Australia
- Saudi Arabia
- Bahrain
- China
- Indonesia

Europe

NICK BIDWELL

Evolution in Nations League

The fourth edition of the UEFA Nations League begins with a revised format

Preview

The international football wheel never stops turning. Less than two months after the 2024 European Championship final, the fourth campaign of the UEFA Nations League gets underway, with participants either aiming to follow in the footsteps of previous winners Portugal, France and Spain, shooting for promotion within the pyramid, or looking to gain lucky loser status in 2026 World Cup qualification.

ABOVE: Rematch ...Group A2 rivals France and Belgium went head-to-head at Euro 2024

LEFT: European champions...Spain won the 2022-23 Nations League

New era...England's first game of the post-Southgate era will be against Republic of Ireland in Dublin

No one can deny that in the eyes of some top nations and overworked elite players, the Nations League is regarded as something of an irrelevance, just more additional fixtures in an already stuffed schedule. Yet, further down the international hierarchy, it certainly has its supporters. Thanks to the breaking down of the UEFA family into four mini-leagues, even the so-called minnows have a rainbow to aim at. Everyone has a stake, everyone has something to play for. It's a mouth-watering prospect for the Groups B, C and D streamers. A strong set of Nations League results and you can be involved in a play-off for World Cup or European Championship qualification.

Take the example of Georgia, who this year took the Nations League route, beating Luxembourg and Greece in the play-offs and going on to spectacularly reach the last 16 of Euro 2024.

Everyone has a stake, everyone has something to play for

This season's Nations League action should also be a useful back-to-the-drawing-board exercise for some of the most prestigious national teams on the continent, the big-hitters who for one reason or another, did not live up to expectations at the recent European Championship. The likes of France, Portugal, Belgium and Italy have the opportunity to rethink and recalibrate and what's more, to do so in a competitive environment.

A number of intriguing questions spring to mind. Will France rediscover the thrill of scoring from open play? Can Belgium boss Domenico Tedesco release the safety-first handbrake? Has Cristiano Ronaldo exhausted his relevance for Portugal? Can Italy boss Luciano Spalletti finally decide on a durable system and a core of key players?

Then there's the case of Euro 2024 runners-up England. With Gareth Southgate stepping down after eight years at the helm, a fresh face in the technical area has to be bedded in, and new incumbent Lee Carsley – who is stepping up from the U21s in an interim role for the time being – has problems to resolve, not least England's lack of attacking bravery under Southgate, below-average possession play and the need for better options at full-back. Ties in Group B2 against Finland, Republic of Ireland and Greece provide Carsley with the perfect audition to show the FA he is the right man to take the Three Lions forward on a permanent basis.

Changes have been made to the format for 2024-25. In League A, two-legged quarter-finals have been introduced, featuring the top two from each of the four pools, increasing the knockout stage representation from four teams to eight. The winners of the four quarter-finals, which take place in March 2025, will then proceed to the finals in June.

The teams finishing bottom in Leagues A and B are automatically demoted to League B and C respectively. The two lowest-ranked fourth-placed teams in League C will be relegated to League D.

Meanwhile, the four group winners in Leagues B and C, plus the two group winners in League D, pass directly to Leagues A, B and C respectively.

A home and away promotion-relegation play-off will pit the third-ranked teams in League A against the runners-up in B. Likewise between those in the same positions in B and C.

Another play-off will be contested by the two best-ranked fourth-placed teams from League C and the two runners-up from League D.

The four best-ranked Nations League group winners (who finish outside of the top two in their World Cup qualifying group) will take part in the play-offs for the 2026 World Cup.

THE DRAW

LEAGUE A

GROUP A1
- Croatia
- Poland
- Portugal
- Scotland

GROUP A2
- Belgium
- France
- Israel
- Italy

GROUP A3
- Bosnia-Herzegovina
- Germany
- Hungary
- Netherlands

GROUP A4
- Denmark
- Serbia
- Spain
- Switzerland

LEAGUE B

GROUP B1
- Albania
- Czech Republic
- Georgia
- Ukraine

GROUP B2
- England
- Finland
- Greece
- Republic of Ireland

GROUP B3
- Austria
- Kazakhstan
- Norway
- Slovenia

GROUP B4
- Iceland
- Montenegro
- Turkey
- Wales

LEAGUE C

GROUP C1
- Azerbaijan
- Estonia
- Slovakia
- Sweden

GROUP C2
- Cyprus
- Kosovo
- Lithuania
- Romania

GROUP C3
- Belarus
- Bulgaria
- Luxembourg
- Northern Ireland

GROUP C4
- Armenia
- Faroe Islands
- Latvia
- North Macedonia

LEAGUE D

GROUP D1
- Gibraltar
- Liechtenstein
- San Marino

GROUP D2
- Andorra
- Malta
- Moldova

CONCACAF

JAMES NALTON

CONCACAF's Nations League resumes again

Mirroring UEFA, CONCACAF also embarks on its fourth edition of the competition

Point to prove ...Costa Rica are aiming to get back into CONCACAF's top four

The 2024 Copa America experience left the guest participants from CONCACAF with plenty to ponder ahead of the 2026 World Cup and, more immediately, heading into the new Nations League season.

Regional heavyweights United States and Mexico will both have new faces in the dugout for the 2024-25 Nations League. Their respective head coaches, Gregg Berhalter and Jaime Lozano, were sacked on the back of poor performances at the Copa America – a tournament seen as the last big test before 2026.

Canada were the surprise success story from CONCACAF under new head coach Jesse Marsch, reaching the semi-finals before being knocked out by eventual winners Argentina and only losing the third-place match against Uruguay on penalties. The American coach has revived them, but this Nations League will be a test of whether that Copa America performance was just a flash in the pan. Can Marsch build on it and confirm Canada as a real force in CONCACAF, as they were ahead of the 2022 World Cup?

The answer to that question will have to wait for now as Canada, like the USA, Mexico and Panama, will not participate in the Nations League group stage as their status as the four highest-ranked nations in CONCACAF gives them a bye to the quarter-finals. The three upcoming World Cup co-hosts might have liked the additional competitive games, but have instead arranged some friendly matches against each other on those dates.

The next tier of CONCACAF teams will be looking for strong Nations League group stage showings, especially as the tournament provides paths to 2025 Gold Cup qualification.

Jamaica are one such team, and are another side heading into this tournament with a new head coach after failure to pick up a single point in the Copa America group was followed by Heimir Hallgrimsson's resignation. The Reggae Boyz remain a side with a talented player pool that is not quite

living up to its potential. Surprise new coach Steve McClaren will need to find the balance between getting Premier League stars to regularly join up with the squad while also creating a more tightknit team environment.

The Jamaican federation also needs to make improvements across the board, and then try to convince star player Leon Bailey to return to the fold after he turned down a call-up for the Copa America. This will be an important cycle of games for the strongest of the Caribbean nations if they are to add stability before World Cup qualifying resumes next year.

For another of those next-tier sides, Costa Rica, it is a chance to prove they are still one of the top nations in the region and try to reclaim their status as the best team in Central America – a status that now belongs to Panama. Despite not progressing from their group at the Copa America, Costa Rica managed to draw with Brazil and defeat Paraguay. They will be looking to build on that respectable showing with some more convincing wins back in CONCACAF competition.

Other Central American sides aiming to make strides are Honduras and Guatemala. Both will be looking to at least qualify for the quarter-finals before plotting to upset the top seeds once there.

A handful of teams dominated their respective groups in League B last season, and it will be worth looking out for their progress as they move up to the next level.

The value of the Nations League format is that it pits similar-strength nations against each other and teams can use those competitive games to improve and progress. The test is then whether they can hold their own once promoted.

Nicaragua went through their last campaign unbeaten, only conceding once in six games. They now get the chance to test themselves against higher-ranked Jamaica, as well as the similarly-ranked Cuba and French Guiana in Group B of League A. Honduras and Trinidad & Tobago make up the rest of that group, but League A is a Swiss-style group stage where teams don't play every other team.

Guyana won five out of five in their League B group last season and now enter League A where they will face the challenge of Guatemala as well as Suriname and Martinique. Guadeloupe join them as the other newly promoted side in that group and face their toughest test in the first game: a meeting with Costa Rica.

Teams such as Haiti and El Salvador, who were among those relegated to League B last season, will be looking to bounce straight back to League A and in doing so secure qualification for the Gold Cup. That is the prize for all four group winners in League B.

Elsewhere, St Kitts & Nevis will be disappointed to have ended up back in League C. They will be clear favourites in their group with the Cayman Islands and British Virgin Islands. They look set to continue the kind of yo-yo act that could become part of the Nations League narrative for teams before they settle, they hope, at the higher level.

Canada, USA, Mexico and Panama will not participate in the group stage as their status as the four highest-ranked nations in CONCACAF gives them a bye to the quarter-finals

Teams in League C are also playing for a spot in the play-offs for 2025 Gold Cup qualifying. The route to the tournament proper for League C is a relatively long and difficult one, but at least there is an opportunity to do so. It is something St Kitts & Nevis managed back in 2023.

It is all part of a range of compelling storylines for the Nations League, which continues to create drama and intrigue.

Rebuilding... Jamaica suffered a disappointing Copa America

On a high...Nicaragua cruised through their League B group last campaign

THE DRAW

LEAGUE A

GROUP A

- Costa Rica
- Guadeloupe
- Guatemala
- Guyana
- Martinique
- Suriname

GROUP B

- Cuba
- French Guiana
- Honduras
- Jamaica
- Nicaragua
- Trinidad & Tobago

LEAGUE B

GROUP A

- Bonaire
- El Salvador
- Montserrat
- St Vincent & Grenadines

GROUP B

- Curacao
- Grenada
- Saint Martin
- St Lucia

GROUP C

- Aruba
- Haiti
- Puerto Rico
- Sint Maarten

GROUP D

- Antigua & Barbuda
- Bermuda
- Dominica
- Dominican Republic

LEAGUE C

GROUP A

- Bahamas
- Barbados
- US Virgin Islands

GROUP B

- Anguilla
- Belize
- Turks & Caicos

GROUP C

- British Virgin Islands
- Cayman Islands
- St Kitts & Nevis

Africa

MARK GLEESON

Hosts...Morocco will take part in qualifying to help prepare

The hectic road to Morocco

Qualifying for next year's delayed Africa Cup of Nations tournament will be crammed into the next couple of months

It is unusual, but not unprecedented, to have a qualifying process crammed into such a brief period but September's international break marks the start of the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations preliminaries – and within a couple of months they will all be over.

The vagaries of the international calendar, and the frequency of the biennial Cup of Nations, means there is no alternative but to jam the qualifiers into three international match windows in September, October and then November, with teams playing two matches in each window.

The three-month qualifying blitz will produce the final line-up of 24 teams who will play in the finals in Morocco, but the tournament itself has been put back six months and so it will be more than a year between the end of the qualifiers and the start of the tournament on December 21, 2025.

African football's showcase event has been shunted aside by FIFA's Club World Cup that is taking place in June and July next year. The Cup of Nations in Morocco was supposed to take place in mid-2025, until CAF and FIFA announced that it would be moved to avoid clashing with the new-look competition in the United States, where 32 club sides from around the world will do battle.

It is a blow to Morocco, seeking to use the event to showcase their tourist industry in summer – as well as put a good foot forward as they look ahead to co-hosting the 2030 World Cup – but will now host the Cup of Nations in the colder winter months, with the final on January 18, 2026.

Re-match...AFCON 2023 runners-up Nigeria lost 2-1 to Benin in a 2026 World Cup qualifier in June

The Cup of Nations qualifiers will see 12 groups of four teams, so it means only six matches are played by each competing country – a short process compared to the qualifiers for the 2026 World Cup, which resumes next March and comprises nine groups of six (minus Eritrea who withdrew).

In order to give themselves regular competitive action, hosts Morocco will compete in the Cup of Nations qualifying, so only one other team will advance from their group, which includes Gabon, Central African Republic and Lesotho, with the latter two aiming to qualify for the very first time.

The tournament itself has been put back six months, so it will be more than a year between the end of the qualifiers and the start of the tournament

Of Africa's 54 member nations, only ten have never been to the finals before, with Chad, Eswatini and South Sudan also holding out hopes of a debut showing at the 2025 finals. Djibouti, Sao Tome & Principe and Somalia were eliminated in the preliminary round in March – to Liberia, South Sudan and Eswatini respectively across four two-legged ties (Chad also dispatched Mauritius) – while Eritrea and Seychelles did not participate.

Defending champions Ivory Coast were drawn in Group G where Zambia are the second seeds, while 2023 Cup of Nations runners-up Nigeria have Benin, Libya and Rwanda up against them in Group D.

The Super Eagles have already lost to Benin this year in World Cup qualifying, and once the Cup of Nations qualifiers are completed they will play Rwanda again in March in the race for places at the 2026 finals in North America.

Kenya and Zimbabwe did not take part in the qualifiers for the last finals in the Ivory Coast as both were suspended by FIFA for government interference in the running of their respective football associations. Those sanctions have since been lifted and the two countries were paired in Group J, where Cameroon are top seeds. The fourth side in the group are second seeds Namibia, who were also paired with the Indomitable Lions last time round and took four points off them in the 2023 qualifiers.

Mali, who are top seeds in Group I against Eswatini, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique, need rapid conciliation between their players and federation after captain Hamari Traore was suspended for publicly criticising officials. His complaints, aired online, received the support of many national team colleagues frustrated by the poor administration of the team.

Mali also need a new coach after Eric Chelle was fired following their home defeat to Ghana in June's World Cup qualifiers.

Togo also sacked their coach in the summer – Portuguese Paulo Duarte after three years in charge – again following poor performances in the World Cup preliminaries in mid-year. They will need to have a new man in charge before their opening Cup of Nations qualifier at home to Liberia in Group E.

Zimbabwe, though, have made a new permanent coaching appointment, after they hired 67-year-old German boss Michael Nees, who had previously managed Rwanda and Seychelles.

Repeat...Namibia skipper Peter Shalulile celebrates after scoring v Cameroon in AFCON 2023 qualifying

THE DRAW

GROUP A
Comoros, Gambia, Madagascar, Tunisia

GROUP B
C. African Rep, Gabon, Lesotho, Morocco

GROUP C
Botswana, Cape Verde, Egypt, Mauritania

GROUP D
Benin, Libya, Nigeria, Rwanda

GROUP E
Algeria, Eq. Guinea, Liberia, Togo

GROUP F
Angola, Ghana, Niger, Sudan

GROUP G
Chad, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Zambia

GROUP H
DR Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Tanzania

GROUP I
Eswatini, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mozambique

GROUP J
Cameroon, Kenya, Namibia, Zimbabwe

GROUP K
Congo, South Africa, South Sudan, Uganda

GROUP L
Burkina Faso, Burundi, Malawi, Senegal

CONCACAF

STEVE MENARY

Arnett Gardens win Caribbean Club Shield

Jamaican side lift the Caribbean Football Union (CFU) Club Shield in an encouraging competition for football in the region

Jamaica's Arnett Gardens emerged as winners of the seventh edition of the Caribbean Shield as Rushane Thompson's stunning strike from outside the penalty box was enough to end a surprise run to the final by Grenades from Antigua & Barbuda.

The Caribbean Shield started in 2018 as an annual second-tier competition for clubs in the region, but was administered by CONCACAF, which had taken control of much of the Caribbean Football Association's activities following the corruption scandal in 2011.

With the CFU now seemingly rehabilitated, the organisation has recently been handed back some competitions to organise and the 2024 Caribbean Football Union Shield in Curacao was the highest profile.

The Shield is a second-tier competition, a level below the CONCACAF Caribbean Cup. Out of 31 CFU members, 20 associations met the licensing criteria and were eligible to enter a club. All 20 associations did so, which meant that eight sides took part in the preliminary round.

This produced an instant upset: SWA Sharks from Turks & Caicos ousted Grenada's Paradise 1-0 courtesy of a late first-half strike from Billy Forbes, who has played for a string of clubs in the USL – the second tier of US soccer.

Grenades made an instant impact, recovering from an early setback to hammer Guyana Defence Force 6-2 with their attacking threat demonstrated by six different players getting on the scoresheet.

CCCUL Dublanc from Grenada also started what would be a deep run in the competition in the preliminaries with a 2-0 win over Saint Martin's Junior Stars.

Former champions...Surinamese outfit Robinhood were eliminated by Grenades of Antigua & Barbuda

Holders and two-time winners Robinhood from Suriname were one of 12 sides given a bye into the round of 16 and crushed Etoile Matoury of French Guiana 4-1 with two goals from Surinamese defender Jamilhio Rigters.

Grenades eased past Bonaire's Real Rincon 2-1, while CCCUL Dublanc beat Scholars International of the Cayman Islands 3-0 with Dominican striker Audel Laville getting on the scoresheet for the second successive game. Playing in the full-time Dominican Republic league was always going to help Atletico Pantoja, who saw off Defence Force from Trinidad & Tobago 1-0.

Haitian representatives America des Cayes failed to show up for their last-16 game with Rams Village Superstars due to what the organisers described as a "series of barriers" to getting off the troubled Caribbean Island. This gave their opponents from St Kitts & Nevis a walkover into the next round, where they lost on penalties to Dublanc after a 2-2 draw.

Jamaica's Arnett Gardens were always among the favorites due to the strength of their island's domestic league, but had to come back from an early deficit due to a goalkeeping blunder to squeeze past Aruba's Racing Club with substitute Thompson scoring the winner.

Arnett Gardens found form and thrashed host side Jong Holland 7-1 in the quarter-finals but Atletico Pantoja, who had been run close in their quarter-final victory over Puerto Rico's Metropolitan, proved tougher opposition in the semi-finals.

> **By reaching the final, Arnett Gardens and Grenades were guaranteed places in the 2024 CONCACAF Caribbean Cup**

Keneldo Brown's 18th-minute opener was swiftly cancelled out by a penalty from Robert Rosado. Fabian

Review

Caribbean Shield champions...Arnett Gardens celebrate

Reid took the Jamaicans into the final by connecting with a cross into the box for his fourth goal of the tournament.

In the other semi-final, Grenades won their fourth game in eight days as Sherman Augustin's strike inside the penalty area in the 84th minute proved enough to end Dublanc's run.

By reaching the final, both sides were guaranteed places in the 2024 CONCACAF Caribbean Cup, but there was still plenty to play for.

Arnett Gardens were runners-up in the Caribbean Club Championship in 2018 but, like their opponents, had never won a regional title.

In a tight final, Rushane Thompson scored the only goal in the 73rd minute, taking him to three for the tournament – one behind his captain Fabian Reid, who then lifted the shield as the competition's joint-top scorer alongside Dublanc's Travist Joseph.

After guiding the club to third place via the play-offs in the Jamaica Premier League in his first season, Xavier Gilbert delivered a maiden international trophy. Arnett Gardens will join two other clubs from Jamaica, Cavalier and Mount Pleasant, in Group A of the 2024 CONCACAF Caribbean Cup alongside Haiti's Real Hope and Police from Trinidad & Tobago.

Shock finalists... Grenades were unexpected runners-up

Despite the final defeat, Derrick Edwards, who was only appointed as Grenades' manager shortly before the tournament, will lead the Antiguan side into Group B against Cibao and Moca from the Dominican Republic, Trinidad's Port of Spain and Haiti's Ouanaminthe.

In a well-organised competition, the Shield also provided evidence that the CFU are capable of taking on more tournaments in the future.

Germany & Denmark

STEVE MENARY

Friuli end South Tyrol's hold on the Europeada trophy

Competition for European minority groups is won by the northern Italians

For the first time in its 16-year existence, the Europeada trophy was won by a team other than South Tyrol. Friuli, a corner of Italy that borders with Austria and Slovenia, came out on top in the fifth edition of the competition.

The tournament is arranged by the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), which represents the continent's minorities, and is staged every four years usually to run in conjunction with UEFA's European Championship.

Sudtirol – or South Tyrol, which represents Italy's northernmost, German-speaking, region – won the first tournament in 2008 and each of the subsequent competitions in 2012, 2016 and two years ago, when the Carinthian Slovenes were edged out 1-0 in Austria.

This year's tournament was staged in Northern and Southern Schleswig with four official hosts: the Danish minority in Germany, the German minority in Denmark, the Frisians from Lower West Saxony and the Sinti and Roma people.

Under tournament rules, no players holding a professional contract within the last year could take part but some former pros did feature such as Kolja Afriyie, a former Germany Under-21 international who last played for Danish side Midtjylland but is now 42.

Afriyie and former AC Horsens defender Anders Nohr both played for Sydslesvig, representing the Danes in Germany, who won all three games in Group C and dispatched the Serbs in Croatia in the quarter-finals but lost 3-0 to Friuli in the semi-finals.

The Carinthian Slovenes gained revenge for their final defeat in 2022 by knocking out holders Sudtirol 6-5 in the quarter-finals only to lose 4-0 in the semi-finals to Occitania, which represents speakers of the Occitan dialect, mainly from France.

The experienced Occitania side have played in three previous editions of Europeada and in other non-FIFA tournaments and were favourites going into the final, which drew a crowd of more than 800 people to Flensburg.

The game was goalless at half-time but goals from captain Nicola Tonizzo and striker Francesco Costa put Friuli ahead. A late red card for Leonardo Campana from ASD Brian Lignano Calcio briefly gave Occitania a numerical advantage but Friuli held on to triumph.

> The tournament is arranged by the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), which represents the continent's minorities

The returning players were greeted at Trieste Airport by an enthusiastic crowd waving Friuli flags. "We had a ton of greetings from our region – even much more than expected – and we are grateful to our fans and our players for their commitment and great behaviour during this tournament," said Gabriele Violino from the Associazion Sportive Furlane (ASF).

Winners...Friuli players celebrate their victory

ASF president Daniele Puntel began working on the idea of Friûl selection back in 2022 and the team was formed especially to take part in the 2024 Europeada. The ASF recruited a 20-man squad from 13 regional clubs with Serie D's ASD Codroipo Calcio supplying four, including Tonizzo. Simone Lizzi plays at the same level for ASD Martignacco Calcio, but many others came from the fifth tier Eccellenza, such as striker Costa.

The Europeada success could be the catalyst for further participation by the regional select. Violino adds: "With the Associazion Sportive Furlane we have some different projects on the table and surely we won't stop here, we see this great results as the beginning of our adventure. We still don't know at the moment, we would like to reward our players with an historical friendly match with a club of Friuli, but let's see."

Winger...Enrico Ruffo (R) of Friuli

AUGUST 30-SEPTEMBER 28

Global diary

Games and dates to pencil in for the month ahead

UEFA club competitions

September sees the return of UEFA's two biggest club competitions in their new-look formats. The Champions League is the first to begin, with Matchday 1 taking place on September 17 and 18, while the Europa League returns the following week on September 25 and 26 with both now comprising 36 teams in the group phase instead of 32. The Conference League, meanwhile, begins on Thursday October 3, also now with 36 participants. We'll have a guide to all three competitions in next month's issue.

Meanwhile, qualifying for the women's UEFA Champions League also takes place in September (see more on page 81), concluding with the second legs of the second round on September 25 and 26. The group-stage draw is a day later, with the tournament itself beginning on October 8. The women's tournament will see its own revamp from the 2025-26 season.

The long road...Edin Dzeko scores for Fenerbahce in Champions League qualifying

International action

In September, the UEFA and CONCACAF Nations Leagues restart, 2026 World Cup qualifying continues in Asia and South America, and the qualifiers for AFCON 2027 kick-off (see more in World Service), but there is plenty of other action during this international window.

The road to North America 2026 begins in Oceania, with the Cook Islands, Tonga, American Samoa and Samoa competing for the eighth and final spot in the confederation's group-stage round, which begins in October (a preview will follow in next month's edition).

There's also more action in Asia, where 2027 Asian Cup qualifying – which was coupled with the 2026 World Cup qualifiers up to this point – continues. Six of the continent's minnows take part in a play-off round to join 21 other teams in the third qualifying round. In two-legged home-and-way clashes, Timor-Leste face Mongolia, Sri Lanka meet Cambodia and Macau take on Brunei.

Elsewhere, both Gibraltar and Andorra will each hope to end lengthy winless runs when they meet for a friendly. Neither side have won a game since 2022, with Gibraltar's last victory coming against the same opponents.

UEFA Nations League holders... Spain won the last edition in 2023

5 unmissable matches

- **Republic of Ireland v England, September 7**
  As a former Republic of Ireland midfielder, England caretaker boss Lee Carsley could be in for a frosty reception when he takes charge of his first game in Dublin in the UEFA Nations League.
- **Tottenham v Arsenal, September 15**
  The first North London derby of the season is always worth noting in the calendar. For Arsenal, it's the start of a testing week that will see them begin their Champions League campaign and then travel up to Manchester City.
- **Inter v Milan, September 22**
  Inter's winning streak in the *Derby della Madonnina* now stands at six matches in all competitions after last season's double, which included a 5-1 drubbing in the corresponding fixture.

Rivals...Francesco Acerbi and Olivier Giroud tussle during last season's Milan derby

- **Atletico Madrid v Real Madrid, September 29**
  This fixture comes almost exactly a year after last season's Madrid derby at the Metropolitano, when strike duo Antoine Griezmann and Alvaro Morata fired Atletico to a 3-1 victory.
- **Bayern Munich v Bayer Leverkusen, September 28**
  This will be the first big domestic test for new Bayern boss Vincent Kompany, as he locks horns with Xabi Alonso and takes on the reigning Bundesliga champions at the Allianz Arena.

Global continental competitions

The Copa Libertadores is heating up; by October, South America's premier club competition will be whittled down to four teams, with the two legs of the quarter-finals taking place in September. The Sudamericana follows the same timeline.

Elsewhere, Asia's new-look Champions League competition (more on page 76) is also set to kick-off in September, with the first round of games between September 16 and 18, while the two rounds of qualifying for the African equivalent conclude on September 22.

Up for grabs ...the Copa Libertadores trophy

Homeless World Cup

For the first time in its 21-year history, the next edition of the Homeless World Cup will be backed by FIFA after the governing body signed a memorandum of understanding to support the organisation that organises the annual tournament.

The Homeless World Cup Foundation (HWCF) arranged the first competition in 2003 and added a women's version in 2010. For this year's edition, which will take place in Seoul, South Korea between September 21 and 28, FIFA will provide material and equipment and stream matches on FIFA+.

PREMIER LEAGUE FIXTURES 2024-25

AUGUST 16
Manchester United v Fulham

AUGUST 17
Ipswich Town v Liverpool
Arsenal v Wolves
Everton v Brighton
Newcastle United v Southampton
Nottingham Forest v Bournemouth
West Ham United v Aston Villa

AUGUST 18
Brentford v Crystal Palace
Chelsea v Manchester City

AUGUST 19
Leicester City v Tottenham Hotspur

AUGUST 24
Brighton v Manchester United
Crystal Palace v West Ham United
Fulham v Leicester City
Manchester City v Ipswich Town
Southampton v Nottingham Forest
Tottenham Hotspur v Everton
Aston Villa v Arsenal

AUGUST 25
Bournemouth v Newcastle United
Wolves v Chelsea
Liverpool v Brentford

AUGUST 31
Arsenal v Brighton
Brentford v Southampton
Everton v Bournemouth
Ipswich Town v Fulham
Leicester City v Aston Villa
Nottingham Forest v Wolves
West Ham United v Manchester City

SEPTEMBER 1
Chelsea v Crystal Palace
Newcastle United v Tottenham Hotspur
Manchester United v Liverpool

SEPTEMBER 14
Southampton v Manchester United
Brighton v Ipswich Town
Crystal Palace v Leicester City
Fulham v West Ham United
Liverpool v Nottingham Forest
Manchester City v Brentford
Aston Villa v Everton
Bournemouth v Chelsea

SEPTEMBER 15
Tottenham Hotspur v Arsenal
Wolves v Newcastle United

SEPTEMBER 21
West Ham United v Chelsea
Aston Villa v Wolves
Fulham v Newcastle United
Leicester City v Everton
Liverpool v Bournemouth
Southampton v Ipswich Town
Tottenham Hotspur v Brentford
Crystal Palace v Manchester United

SEPTEMBER 22
Brighton v Nottingham Forest
Manchester City v Arsenal

SEPTEMBER 28
Newcastle United v Manchester City
Arsenal v Leicester City
Brentford v West Ham United
Chelsea v Brighton
Everton v Crystal Palace
Nottingham Forest v Fulham
Wolves v Liverpool

SEPTEMBER 29
Ipswich Town v Aston Villa
Manchester United v Tottenham Hotspur

SEPTEMBER 30
Bournemouth v Southampton

OCTOBER 5
Arsenal v Southampton
Aston Villa v Manchester United
Brentford v Wolves
Brighton v Tottenham Hotspur
Chelsea v Nottingham Forest
Crystal Palace v Liverpool
Everton v Newcastle United
Leicester City v Bournemouth
Manchester City v Fulham
West Ham United v Ipswich Town

OCTOBER 19
Bournemouth v Arsenal
Fulham v Aston Villa
Ipswich Town v Everton
Liverpool v Chelsea
Manchester United v Brentford
Newcastle United v Brighton
Nottingham Forest v Crystal Palace
Southampton v Leicester City
Tottenham Hotspur v West Ham United
Wolves v Manchester City

OCTOBER 26
Arsenal v Liverpool
Aston Villa v Bournemouth
Brentford v Ipswich Town
Brighton v Wolves
Chelsea v Newcastle United
Crystal Palace v Tottenham Hotspur
Everton v Fulham
Leicester City v Nottingham Forest
Manchester City v Southampton
West Ham United v Manchester United

NOVEMBER 2
Bournemouth v Manchester City
Fulham v Brentford
Ipswich Town v Leicester City

Title decider?...Arsenal host defending champions Manchester City in February

Liverpool v Brighton
Manchester United v Chelsea
Newcastle United v Arsenal
Nottingham Forest v West Ham United
Southampton v Everton
Tottenham Hotspur v Aston Villa
Wolves v Crystal Palace

NOVEMBER 9
Brentford v Bournemouth
Brighton v Manchester City
Chelsea v Arsenal
Crystal Palace v Fulham
Liverpool v Aston Villa
Manchester United v Leicester City
Nottingham Forest v Newcastle United
Tottenham Hotspur v Ipswich Town
West Ham United v Everton
Wolves v Southampton

NOVEMBER 23
Arsenal v Nottingham Forest
Aston Villa v Crystal Palace
Bournemouth v Brighton
Everton v Brentford
Fulham v Wolves
Ipswich Town v Manchester United
Leicester City v Chelsea
Manchester City v Tottenham Hotspur
Newcastle United v West Ham United
Southampton v Liverpool

NOVEMBER 30
Brentford v Leicester City
Brighton v Southampton
Chelsea v Aston Villa
Crystal Palace v Newcastle United
Liverpool v Manchester City
Manchester United v Everton
Nottingham Forest v Ipswich Town
Tottenham Hotspur v Fulham
West Ham United v Arsenal
Wolves v Bournemouth

DECEMBER 3
Arsenal v Manchester United
Aston Villa v Brentford
Bournemouth v Tottenham Hotspur
Everton v Wolves
Fulham v Brighton
Ipswich Town v Crystal Palace
Leicester City v West Ham United

DECEMBER 4
Manchester City v Nottingham Forest
Newcastle United v Liverpool
Southampton v Chelsea

DECEMBER 7
Aston Villa v Southampton
Brentford v Newcastle United
Crystal Palace v Manchester City
Everton v Liverpool
Fulham v Arsenal
Ipswich Town v Bournemouth
Leicester City v Brighton
Manchester United v Nottingham Forest
Tottenham Hotspur v Chelsea
West Ham United v Wolves

DECEMBER 14
Arsenal v Everton
Bournemouth v West Ham United
Brighton v Crystal Palace
Chelsea v Brentford
Liverpool v Fulham
Manchester City v Manchester United
Newcastle United v Leicester City
Nottingham Forest v Aston Villa
Southampton v Tottenham Hotspur
Wolves v Ipswich Town

DECEMBER 21
Aston Villa v Manchester City
Brentford v Nottingham Forest
Crystal Palace v Arsenal
Everton v Chelsea
Fulham v Southampton
Ipswich Town v Newcastle United
Leicester City v Wolves
Manchester United v Bournemouth
Tottenham Hotspur v Liverpool
West Ham United v Brighton

DECEMBER 26
Arsenal v Ipswich Town
Bournemouth v Crystal Palace
Brighton v Brentford
Chelsea v Fulham
Liverpool v Leicester City
Manchester City v Everton
Newcastle United v Aston Villa
Nottingham Forest v Tottenham Hotspur
Southampton v West Ham United
Wolves v Manchester United

New boys... Ipswich take on Leicester in November and May

DECEMBER 29

Aston Villa v Brighton
Brentford v Arsenal
Crystal Palace v Southampton
Everton v Nottingham Forest
Fulham v Bournemouth
Ipswich Town v Chelsea
Leicester City v Manchester City
Manchester United v Newcastle United
Tottenham Hotspur v Wolves
West Ham United v Liverpool

JANUARY 4

Aston Villa v Leicester City
Bournemouth v Everton
Brighton v Arsenal
Crystal Palace v Chelsea
Fulham v Ipswich Town
Liverpool v Manchester United
Manchester City v West Ham United
Southampton v Brentford
Tottenham Hotspur v Newcastle United
Wolves v Nottingham Forest

JANUARY 14

Arsenal v Tottenham Hotspur
Brentford v Manchester City
Everton v Aston Villa
Ipswich Town v Brighton
Leicester City v Crystal Palace
Nottingham Forest v Liverpool
West Ham United v Fulham

JANUARY 15

Chelsea v Bournemouth
Newcastle United v Wolves
Manchester United v Southampton

JANUARY 18

Arsenal v Aston Villa
Brentford v Liverpool
Chelsea v Wolves
Everton v Tottenham Hotspur
Ipswich Town v Manchester City
Leicester City v Fulham
Manchester United v Brighton
Newcastle United v Bournemouth
Nottingham Forest v Southampton
West Ham United v Crystal Palace

JANUARY 25

Aston Villa v West Ham United
Bournemouth v Nottingham Forest
Brighton v Everton
Crystal Palace v Brentford
Fulham v Manchester United
Liverpool v Ipswich Town
Manchester City v Chelsea
Southampton v Newcastle United
Tottenham Hotspur v Leicester City
Wolves v Arsenal

FEBRUARY 1

Arsenal v Manchester City
Bournemouth v Liverpool
Brentford v Tottenham Hotspur
Chelsea v West Ham United
Everton v Leicester City
Ipswich Town v Southampton
Manchester United v Crystal Palace
Newcastle United v Fulham
Nottingham Forest v Brighton
Wolves v Aston Villa

FEBRUARY 15

Aston Villa v Ipswich Town
Brighton v Chelsea
Crystal Palace v Everton
Fulham v Nottingham Forest
Leicester City v Arsenal
Liverpool v Wolves
Manchester City v Newcastle United
Southampton v Bournemouth
Tottenham Hotspur v Manchester United
West Ham United v Brentford

FEBRUARY 22

Arsenal v West Ham United
Aston Villa v Chelsea
Bournemouth v Wolves
Everton v Manchester United
Fulham v Crystal Palace
Ipswich Town v Tottenham Hotspur
Leicester City v Brentford
Manchester City v Liverpool
Newcastle United v Nottingham Forest
Southampton v Brighton

FEBRUARY 25

Brentford v Everton
Brighton v Bournemouth
Nottingham Forest v Arsenal
Tottenham Hotspur v Manchester City
West Ham United v Leicester City
Wolves v Fulham
Crystal Palace v Aston Villa

FEBRUARY 26

Chelsea v Southampton
Liverpool v Newcastle United
Manchester United v Ipswich Town

MARCH 8

Brentford v Aston Villa
Brighton v Fulham
Chelsea v Leicester City
Crystal Palace v Ipswich Town
Liverpool v Southampton
Manchester United v Arsenal
Nottingham Forest v Manchester City
Tottenham Hotspur v Bournemouth
West Ham United v Newcastle United
Wolves v Everton

MARCH 15

Arsenal v Chelsea
Aston Villa v Liverpool
Bournemouth v Brentford
Everton v West Ham United
Fulham v Tottenham Hotspur
Ipswich Town v Nottingham Forest
Leicester City v Manchester United
Manchester City v Brighton
Newcastle United v Crystal Palace
Southampton v Wolves

APRIL 1

Arsenal v Fulham
Bournemouth v Ipswich Town
Brighton v Aston Villa
Nottingham Forest v Manchester United
Wolves v West Ham United

APRIL 2

Chelsea v Tottenham Hotspur
Manchester City v Leicester City
Newcastle United v Brentford
Southampton v Crystal Palace
Liverpool v Everton

APRIL 5

Aston Villa v Nottingham Forest
Brentford v Chelsea
Crystal Palace v Brighton
Everton v Arsenal
Fulham v Liverpool
Ipswich Town v Wolves
Leicester City v Newcastle United
Manchester United v Manchester City
Tottenham Hotspur v Southampton
West Ham United v Bournemouth

Merseyside derby... Anfield plays host to Liverpool v Everton in April

APRIL 12

Arsenal v Brentford
Bournemouth v Fulham
Brighton v Leicester City
Chelsea v Ipswich Town
Liverpool v West Ham United
Manchester City v Crystal Palace
Newcastle United v Manchester United
Nottingham Forest v Everton
Southampton v Aston Villa
Wolves v Tottenham Hotspur

APRIL 19

Aston Villa v Newcastle United
Brentford v Brighton
Crystal Palace v Bournemouth
Everton v Manchester City
Fulham v Chelsea
Ipswich Town v Arsenal
Leicester City v Liverpool
Manchester United v Wolves
Tottenham Hotspur v Nottingham Forest
West Ham United v Southampton

APRIL 26

Arsenal v Crystal Palace
Bournemouth v Manchester United
Brighton v West Ham United
Chelsea v Everton
Liverpool v Tottenham Hotspur
Manchester City v Aston Villa
Newcastle United v Ipswich Town
Nottingham Forest v Brentford
Southampton v Fulham
Wolves v Leicester City

MAY 3

Arsenal v Bournemouth
Aston Villa v Fulham
Brentford v Manchester United
Brighton v Newcastle United
Chelsea v Liverpool
Crystal Palace v Nottingham Forest
Everton v Ipswich Town
Leicester City v Southampton
Manchester City v Wolves
West Ham United v Tottenham Hotspur

MAY 10

Bournemouth v Aston Villa
Fulham v Everton
Ipswich Town v Brentford
Liverpool v Arsenal
Manchester United v West Ham United
Newcastle United v Chelsea
Nottingham Forest v Leicester City
Southampton v Manchester City
Tottenham Hotspur v Crystal Palace
Wolves v Brighton

MAY 18

Arsenal v Newcastle United
Aston Villa v Tottenham Hotspur
Brentford v Fulham
Brighton v Liverpool
Chelsea v Manchester United
Crystal Palace v Wolves
Everton v Southampton
Leicester City v Ipswich Town
Manchester City v Bournemouth
West Ham United v Nottingham Forest

MAY 25

Bournemouth v Leicester City
Fulham v Manchester City
Ipswich Town v West Ham United
Liverpool v Crystal Palace
Manchester United v Aston Villa
Newcastle United v Everton
Nottingham Forest v Chelsea
Southampton v Arsenal
Tottenham Hotspur v Brighton
Wolves v Brentford

• Televised games for October 5 onwards are yet to be announced. All fixtures are subject to change

LA LIGA FIXTURES 2024-25

AUGUST 15
Athletic Club v Getafe
Real Betis v Girona

AUGUST 16
Celta Vigo v Alaves
Las Palmas v Sevilla

AUGUST 17
Osasuna v Leganes
Valencia v Barcelona

AUGUST 18
Real Sociedad v Rayo Vallecano
Mallorca v Real Madrid

AUGUST 19
Real Valladolid v Espanyol
Villarreal v Atletico Madrid

AUGUST 23
Celta Vigo v Valencia
Sevilla v Villarreal

AUGUST 24
Osasuna v Mallorca
Barcelona v Athletic Club
Espanyol v Real Sociedad
Getafe v Rayo Vallecano

AUGUST 25
Real Madrid v Real Valladolid
Leganes v Las Palmas
Alaves v Real Betis
Atletico Madrid v Girona

AUGUST 26
Villarreal v Celta Vigo

AUGUST 27
Mallorca v Sevilla
Rayo Vallecano v Barcelona

AUGUST 28
Athletic Club v Valencia
Real Valladolid v Leganes
Atletico Madrid v Espanyol
Real Betis v Getafe
Real Sociedad v Alaves

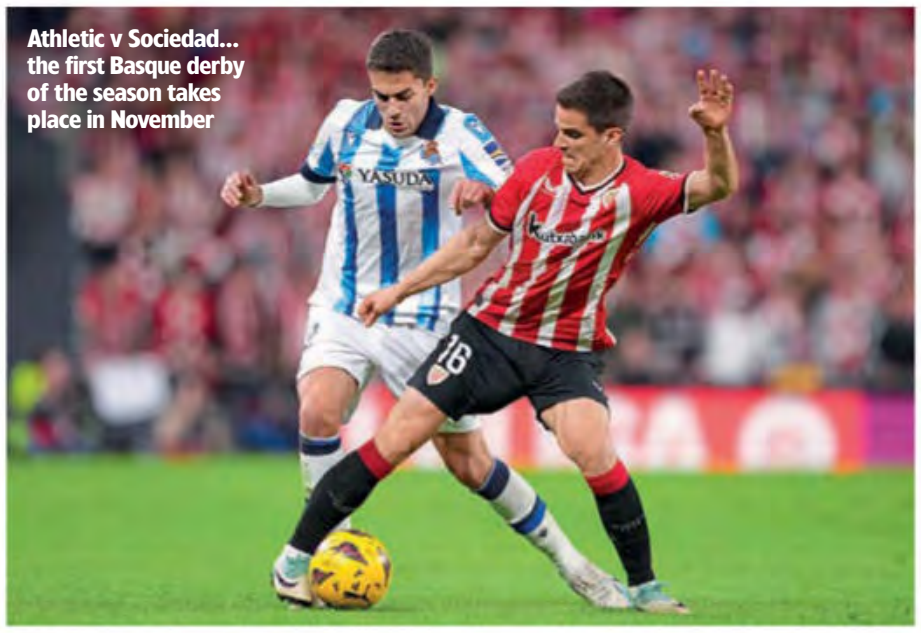
AUGUST 29
Girona v Osasuna
Las Palmas v Real Madrid

AUGUST 31
Barcelona v Real Valladolid
Athletic Club v Atletico Madrid
Espanyol v Rayo Vallecano
Leganes v Mallorca
Valencia v Villarreal

SEPTEMBER 1
Alaves v Las Palmas
Osasuna v Celta Vigo
Sevilla v Girona
Getafe v Real Sociedad
Real Madrid v Real Betis

SEPTEMBER 15
Atletico Madrid v Valencia
Celta Vigo v Real Valladolid
Espanyol v Alaves
Girona v Barcelona
Las Palmas v Athletic Club
Mallorca v Villarreal
Rayo Vallecano v Osasuna
Real Betis v Leganes
Real Sociedad v Real Madrid
Sevilla v Getafe

SEPTEMBER 22
Alaves v Sevilla
Athletic Club v Celta Vigo
Getafe v Leganes
Osasuna v Las Palmas
Rayo Vallecano v Atletico Madrid
Real Betis v Mallorca
Real Madrid v Espanyol


Athletic v Sociedad... the first Basque derby of the season takes place in November

Real Valladolid v Real Sociedad
Valencia v Girona
Villarreal v Barcelona

SEPTEMBER 25
Barcelona v Getafe
Celta Vigo v Atletico Madrid
Espanyol v Villarreal
Girona v Rayo Vallecano
Las Palmas v Real Betis
Leganes v Athletic Club
Mallorca v Real Sociedad
Real Madrid v Alaves
Sevilla v Real Valladolid
Valencia v Osasuna

SEPTEMBER 29
Athletic Club v Sevilla
Atletico Madrid v Real Madrid
Celta Vigo v Girona
Getafe v Alaves
Osasuna v Barcelona
Rayo Vallecano v Leganes
Real Betis v Espanyol
Real Sociedad v Valencia
Real Valladolid v Mallorca
Villarreal v Las Palmas

OCTOBER 6
Alaves v Barcelona
Espanyol v Mallorca
Getafe v Osasuna
Girona v Athletic Club
Las Palmas v Celta Vigo
Leganes v Valencia
Real Madrid v Villarreal
Real Sociedad v Atletico Madrid
Real Valladolid v Rayo Vallecano
Sevilla v Real Betis

OCTOBER 20
Alaves v Real Valladolid
Athletic Club v Espanyol
Atletico Madrid v Leganes
Barcelona v Sevilla
Celta Vigo v Real Madrid
Girona v Real Sociedad
Mallorca v Rayo Vallecano
Osasuna v Real Betis
Valencia v Las Palmas
Villarreal v Getafe

OCTOBER 27
Espanyol v Sevilla
Getafe v Valencia
Las Palmas v Girona
Leganes v Celta Vigo
Mallorca v Athletic Club
Rayo Vallecano v Alaves
Real Betis v Atletico Madrid
Real Madrid v Barcelona
Real Sociedad v Osasuna
Real Valladolid v Villarreal

NOVEMBER 3
Alaves v Mallorca
Athletic Club v Real Betis
Atletico Madrid v Las Palmas
Barcelona v Espanyol
Celta Vigo v Getafe
Girona v Leganes
Osasuna v Real Valladolid
Sevilla v Real Sociedad
Valencia v Real Madrid
Villarreal v Rayo Vallecano

NOVEMBER 10
Espanyol v Valencia
Getafe v Girona
Leganes v Sevilla
Mallorca v Atletico Madrid
Rayo Vallecano v Las Palmas
Real Betis v Celta Vigo
Real Madrid v Osasuna
Real Sociedad v Barcelona
Real Valladolid v Athletic Club
Villarreal v Alaves

NOVEMBER 24
Athletic Club v Real Sociedad
Atletico Madrid v Alaves
Celta Vigo v Barcelona
Getafe v Real Valladolid
Girona v Espanyol
Las Palmas v Mallorca
Leganes v Real Madrid
Osasuna v Villarreal
Sevilla v Rayo Vallecano
Valencia v Real Betis

DECEMBER 1
Alaves v Leganes
Barcelona v Las Palmas
Espanyol v Celta Vigo
Mallorca v Valencia
Rayo Vallecano v Athletic Club
Real Madrid v Getafe
Real Sociedad v Real Betis
Real Valladolid v Atletico Madrid
Sevilla v Osasuna
Villarreal v Girona

DECEMBER 8
Athletic Club v Villarreal
Atletico Madrid v Sevilla
Celta Vigo v Mallorca
Getafe v Espanyol
Girona v Real Madrid
Las Palmas v Real Valladolid
Leganes v Real Sociedad
Osasuna v Alaves
Real Betis v Barcelona
Valencia v Rayo Vallecano

DECEMBER 15
Alaves v Athletic Club
Atletico Madrid v Getafe
Barcelona v Leganes
Espanyol v Osasuna
Mallorca v Girona
Rayo Vallecano v Real Madrid
Real Sociedad v Las Palmas
Real Valladolid v Valencia
Sevilla v Celta Vigo
Villarreal v Real Betis

El Clasico...get October 27 and May 11 in the diary

DECEMBER 22
Barcelona v Atletico Madrid
Celta Vigo v Real Sociedad
Getafe v Mallorca
Girona v Real Valladolid
Las Palmas v Espanyol
Leganes v Villarreal
Osasuna v Athletic Club
Real Betis v Rayo Vallecano
Real Madrid v Sevilla
Valencia v Alaves

JANUARY 12
Alaves v Girona
Athletic Club v Real Madrid
Atletico Madrid v Osasuna
Espanyol v Leganes
Las Palmas v Getafe
Mallorca v Barcelona
Rayo Vallecano v Celta Vigo
Real Sociedad v Villarreal
Real Valladolid v Real Betis
Sevilla v Valencia

JANUARY 19
Celta Vigo v Athletic Club
Espanyol v Real Valladolid
Getafe v Barcelona
Girona v Sevilla
Leganes v Atletico Madrid
Osasuna v Rayo Vallecano
Real Betis v Alaves
Real Madrid v Las Palmas
Valencia v Real Sociedad
Villarreal v Mallorca

JANUARY 26
Alaves v Celta Vigo
Athletic Club v Leganes
Atletico Madrid v Villarreal
Barcelona v Valencia
Las Palmas v Osasuna
Mallorca v Real Betis
Rayo Vallecano v Girona
Real Sociedad v Getafe
Real Valladolid v Real Madrid
Sevilla v Espanyol

FEBRUARY 2
Atletico Madrid v Mallorca
Barcelona v Alaves
Espanyol v Real Madrid
Getafe v Sevilla
Girona v Las Palmas
Leganes v Rayo Vallecano
Osasuna v Real Sociedad
Real Betis v Athletic Club
Valencia v Celta Vigo
Villarreal v Real Valladolid

FEBRUARY 9
Alaves v Getafe
Athletic Club v Girona
Celta Vigo v Real Betis
Las Palmas v Villarreal
Mallorca v Osasuna
Rayo Vallecano v Real Valladolid
Real Madrid v Atletico Madrid
Real Sociedad v Espanyol
Sevilla v Barcelona
Valencia v Leganes

FEBRUARY 16
Atletico Madrid v Celta Vigo
Barcelona v Rayo Vallecano
Espanyol v Athletic Club
Girona v Getafe
Leganes v Alaves
Mallorca v Las Palmas
Osasuna v Real Madrid
Real Betis v Real Sociedad
Real Valladolid v Sevilla
Villarreal v Valencia

FEBRUARY 23
Alaves v Espanyol
Athletic Club v Real Valladolid
Celta Vigo v Osasuna
Getafe v Real Betis
Las Palmas v Barcelona
Rayo Vallecano v Villarreal
Real Madrid v Girona
Real Sociedad v Leganes
Sevilla v Mallorca
Valencia v Atletico Madrid

Thriller...can Girona v Mallorca in May match last season's 5-3 goal-fest?

MARCH 2
Atletico Madrid v Athletic Club
Barcelona v Real Sociedad
Girona v Celta Vigo
Leganes v Getafe
Mallorca v Alaves
Osasuna v Valencia
Rayo Vallecano v Sevilla
Real Betis v Real Madrid
Real Valladolid v Las Palmas
Villarreal v Espanyol

MARCH 9
Alaves v Villarreal
Athletic Club v Mallorca
Barcelona v Osasuna
Celta Vigo v Leganes
Espanyol v Girona
Getafe v Atletico Madrid
Real Betis v Las Palmas
Real Madrid v Rayo Vallecano
Real Sociedad v Sevilla
Valencia v Real Valladolid

MARCH 16
Atletico Madrid v Barcelona
Girona v Valencia
Las Palmas v Alaves
Leganes v Real Betis
Mallorca v Espanyol
Osasuna v Getafe
Rayo Vallecano v Real Sociedad
Real Valladolid v Celta Vigo
Sevilla v Athletic Club
Villarreal v Real Madrid

MARCH 30
Alaves v Rayo Vallecano
Athletic Club v Osasuna
Barcelona v Girona
Celta Vigo v Las Palmas
Espanyol v Atletico Madrid
Getafe v Villarreal
Real Betis v Sevilla
Real Madrid v Leganes
Real Sociedad v Real Valladolid
Valencia v Mallorca

APRIL 6
Barcelona v Real Betis
Girona v Alaves
Las Palmas v Real Sociedad
Leganes v Osasuna
Mallorca v Celta Vigo
Rayo Vallecano v Espanyol
Real Madrid v Valencia
Real Valladolid v Getafe
Sevilla v Atletico Madrid
Villarreal v Athletic Club

APRIL 13
Alaves v Real Madrid
Athletic Club v Rayo Vallecano
Atletico Madrid v Real Valladolid
Celta Vigo v Espanyol
Getafe v Las Palmas
Leganes v Barcelona
Osasuna v Girona
Real Betis v Villarreal
Real Sociedad v Mallorca
Valencia v Sevilla

APRIL 20
Barcelona v Celta Vigo
Espanyol v Getafe
Girona v Real Betis
Las Palmas v Atletico Madrid
Mallorca v Leganes
Rayo Vallecano v Valencia
Real Madrid v Athletic Club
Real Valladolid v Osasuna
Sevilla v Alaves
Villarreal v Real Sociedad

APRIL 23
Alaves v Real Sociedad
Athletic Club v Las Palmas
Atletico Madrid v Rayo Vallecano
Barcelona v Mallorca
Celta Vigo v Villarreal
Getafe v Real Madrid
Leganes v Girona
Osasuna v Sevilla
Real Betis v Real Valladolid
Valencia v Espanyol

MAY 4
Alaves v Atletico Madrid
Espanyol v Real Betis
Girona v Mallorca
Las Palmas v Valencia
Rayo Vallecano v Getafe
Real Madrid v Celta Vigo
Real Sociedad v Athletic Club
Real Valladolid v Barcelona
Sevilla v Leganes
Villarreal v Osasuna

MAY 11
Athletic Club v Alaves
Atletico Madrid v Real Sociedad
Barcelona v Real Madrid
Celta Vigo v Sevilla
Girona v Villarreal
Las Palmas v Rayo Vallecano
Leganes v Espanyol
Mallorca v Real Valladolid
Real Betis v Osasuna
Valencia v Getafe

MAY 14
Alaves v Valencia
Espanyol v Barcelona
Getafe v Athletic Club
Osasuna v Atletico Madrid
Rayo Vallecano v Real Betis
Real Madrid v Mallorca
Real Sociedad v Celta Vigo
Real Valladolid v Girona
Sevilla v Las Palmas
Villarreal v Leganes

MAY 18
Atletico Madrid v Real Betis
Barcelona v Villarreal
Celta Vigo v Rayo Vallecano
Las Palmas v Leganes
Mallorca v Getafe
Osasuna v Espanyol
Real Sociedad v Girona
Real Valladolid v Alaves
Sevilla v Real Madrid
Valencia v Athletic Club

MAY 25
Alaves v Osasuna
Athletic Club v Barcelona
Espanyol v Las Palmas
Getafe v Celta Vigo
Girona v Atletico Madrid
Leganes v Real Valladolid
Rayo Vallecano v Mallorca
Real Betis v Valencia
Real Madrid v Real Sociedad
Villarreal v Sevilla

• Televised games for September 15 onwards are yet to be announced. All fixtures are subject to change

BUNDESLIGA FIXTURES 2024-25

AUGUST 23
Borussia M'gladbach v Bayer Leverkusen

AUGUST 24
Augsburg v Werder Bremen
Freiburg v Stuttgart
Hoffenheim v Holstein Kiel
Mainz v Union Berlin
RB Leipzig v Bochum
Borussia Dortmund v Eintracht Frankfurt

AUGUST 25
Wolfsburg v Bayern Munich
St Pauli v Heidenheim

AUGUST 30
Union Berlin v St Pauli

AUGUST 31
Bochum v Borussia M'gladbach
Eintracht Frankfurt v Hoffenheim
Holstein Kiel v Wolfsburg
Stuttgart v Mainz
Werder Bremen v Borussia Dortmund
Bayer Leverkusen v RB Leipzig

SEPTEMBER 1
Heidenheim v Augsburg
Bayern Munich v Freiburg

SEPTEMBER 13
Borussia Dortmund v Heidenheim

SEPTEMBER 14
Borussia M'gladbach v Stuttgart
Freiburg v Bochum
Hoffenheim v Bayer Leverkusen
RB Leipzig v Union Berlin
Wolfsburg v Eintracht Frankfurt
Holstein Kiel v Bayern Munich

SEPTEMBER 15
Augsburg v St Pauli
Mainz v Werder Bremen

SEPTEMBER 20
Augsburg v Mainz

SEPTEMBER 21
Bochum v Holstein Kiel
Heidenheim v Freiburg
Union Berlin v Hoffenheim
Werder Bremen v Bayern Munich
Eintracht Frankfurt v Borussia M'gladbach

SEPTEMBER 22
Bayer Leverkusen v Wolfsburg
Stuttgart v Borussia Dortmund
St Pauli v RB Leipzig

SEPTEMBER 27
Borussia Dortmund v Bochum

SEPTEMBER 28
Borussia M'gladbach v Union Berlin
Freiburg v St Pauli
Mainz v Heidenheim
RB Leipzig v Augsburg
Wolfsburg v Stuttgart
Bayern Munich v Bayer Leverkusen

SEPTEMBER 29
Holstein Kiel v Eintracht Frankfurt
Hoffenheim v Werder Bremen

OCTOBER 5
Augsburg v Borussia M'gladbach
Bayer Leverkusen v Holstein Kiel
Bochum v Wolfsburg
Eintracht Frankfurt v Bayern Munich
Heidenheim v RB Leipzig
St Pauli v Mainz
Stuttgart v Hoffenheim
Union Berlin v Borussia Dortmund
Werder Bremen v Freiburg

OCTOBER 19
Bayer Leverkusen v Eintracht Frankfurt
Bayern Munich v Stuttgart
Borussia Dortmund v St Pauli
Borussia M'gladbach v Heidenheim
Freiburg v Augsburg
Hoffenheim v Bochum
Holstein Kiel v Union Berlin
Mainz v RB Leipzig
Wolfsburg v Werder Bremen

OCTOBER 26
Augsburg v Borussia Dortmund
Bochum v Bayern Munich
Heidenheim v Hoffenheim
Mainz v Borussia M'gladbach
RB Leipzig v Freiburg
St Pauli v Wolfsburg
Stuttgart v Holstein Kiel
Union Berlin v Eintracht Frankfurt
Werder Bremen v Bayer Leverkusen

NOVEMBER 2
Bayer Leverkusen v Stuttgart
Bayern Munich v Union Berlin
Borussia Dortmund v RB Leipzig
Borussia M'gladbach v Werder Bremen
Eintracht Frankfurt v Bochum
Freiburg v Mainz
Hoffenheim v St Pauli
Holstein Kiel v Heidenheim
Wolfsburg v Augsburg

Augsburg v Hoffenheim...the duo who jointly-recorded the biggest away wins last season will face-off in November

NOVEMBER 9
Augsburg v Hoffenheim
Bochum v Bayer Leverkusen
Heidenheim v Wolfsburg
Mainz v Borussia Dortmund
RB Leipzig v Borussia M'gladbach
St Pauli v Bayern Munich
Stuttgart v Eintracht Frankfurt
Union Berlin v Freiburg
Werder Bremen v Holstein Kiel

NOVEMBER 23
Bayer Leverkusen v Heidenheim
Bayern Munich v Augsburg
Borussia Dortmund v Freiburg
Borussia M'gladbach v St Pauli
Eintracht Frankfurt v Werder Bremen
Hoffenheim v RB Leipzig
Holstein Kiel v Mainz
Stuttgart v Bochum
Wolfsburg v Union Berlin

NOVEMBER 30
Augsburg v Bochum
Borussia Dortmund v Bayern Munich
Freiburg v Borussia M'gladbach
Heidenheim v Eintracht Frankfurt
Mainz v Hoffenheim
RB Leipzig v Wolfsburg
St Pauli v Holstein Kiel
Union Berlin v Bayer Leverkusen
Werder Bremen v Stuttgart

DECEMBER 7
Bayer Leverkusen v St Pauli
Bayern Munich v Heidenheim
Bochum v Werder Bremen
Borussia M'gladbach v Borussia Dortmund
Eintracht Frankfurt v Augsburg
Hoffenheim v Freiburg
Holstein Kiel v RB Leipzig
Stuttgart v Union Berlin
Wolfsburg v Mainz

DECEMBER 14
Augsburg v Bayer Leverkusen
Borussia Dortmund v Hoffenheim
Borussia M'gladbach v Holstein Kiel
Freiburg v Wolfsburg
Heidenheim v Stuttgart
Mainz v Bayern Munich
RB Leipzig v Eintracht Frankfurt
St Pauli v Werder Bremen
Union Berlin v Bochum

DECEMBER 21
Bayer Leverkusen v Freiburg
Bayern Munich v RB Leipzig
Bochum v Heidenheim
Eintracht Frankfurt v Mainz
Hoffenheim v Borussia M'gladbach
Holstein Kiel v Augsburg
Stuttgart v St Pauli
Werder Bremen v Union Berlin
Wolfsburg v Borussia Dortmund

JANUARY 11
Augsburg v Stuttgart
Borussia Dortmund v Bayer Leverkusen
Borussia M'gladbach v Bayern Munich
Freiburg v Holstein Kiel
Heidenheim v Union Berlin
Hoffenheim v Wolfsburg
Mainz v Bochum
RB Leipzig v Werder Bremen
St Pauli v Eintracht Frankfurt

JANUARY 15
Bayer Leverkusen v Mainz
Bayern Munich v Hoffenheim
Bochum v St Pauli
Eintracht Frankfurt v Freiburg
Holstein Kiel v Borussia Dortmund
Stuttgart v RB Leipzig
Union Berlin v Augsburg
Werder Bremen v Heidenheim
Wolfsburg v Borussia M'gladbach

JANUARY 18
Bayer Leverkusen v Borussia M'gladbach
Bayern Munich v Wolfsburg
Bochum v RB Leipzig
Eintracht Frankfurt v Borussia Dortmund
Heidenheim v St Pauli
Holstein Kiel v Hoffenheim
Stuttgart v Freiburg
Union Berlin v Mainz
Werder Bremen v Augsburg

Last season's top two... Bayer Leverkusen host Stuttgart in November

Der Klassiker... Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund do battle in April

JANUARY 25
Augsburg v Heidenheim
Borussia Dortmund v Werder Bremen
Borussia M'gladbach v Bochum
Freiburg v Bayern Munich
Hoffenheim v Eintracht Frankfurt
Mainz v Stuttgart
RB Leipzig v Bayer Leverkusen
St Pauli v Union Berlin
Wolfsburg v Holstein Kiel

FEBRUARY 1
Bayer Leverkusen v Hoffenheim
Bayern Munich v Holstein Kiel
Bochum v Freiburg
Eintracht Frankfurt v Wolfsburg
Heidenheim v Borussia Dortmund
St Pauli v Augsburg
Stuttgart v Borussia M'gladbach
Union Berlin v RB Leipzig
Werder Bremen v Mainz

FEBRUARY 8
Bayern Munich v Werder Bremen
Borussia Dortmund v Stuttgart
Borussia M'gladbach v Eintracht Frankfurt
Freiburg v Heidenheim
Hoffenheim v Union Berlin
Holstein Kiel v Bochum
Mainz v Augsburg
RB Leipzig v St Pauli
Wolfsburg v Bayer Leverkusen

FEBRUARY 15
Augsburg v RB Leipzig
Bayer Leverkusen v Bayern Munich
Bochum v Borussia Dortmund
Eintracht Frankfurt v Holstein Kiel
Heidenheim v Mainz
St Pauli v Freiburg
Stuttgart v Wolfsburg
Union Berlin v Borussia M'gladbach
Werder Bremen v Hoffenheim

FEBRUARY 22
Bayern Munich v Eintracht Frankfurt
Borussia Dortmund v Union Berlin
Borussia M'gladbach v Augsburg
Freiburg v Werder Bremen
Hoffenheim v Stuttgart
Holstein Kiel v Bayer Leverkusen
Mainz v St Pauli
RB Leipzig v Heidenheim
Wolfsburg v Bochum

MARCH 1
Augsburg v Freiburg
Bochum v Hoffenheim
Eintracht Frankfurt v Bayer Leverkusen
Heidenheim v Borussia M'gladbach
RB Leipzig v Mainz
St Pauli v Borussia Dortmund
Stuttgart v Bayern Munich
Union Berlin v Holstein Kiel
Werder Bremen v Wolfsburg

MARCH 8
Bayer Leverkusen v Werder Bremen
Bayern Munich v Bochum
Borussia Dortmund v Augsburg
Borussia M'gladbach v Mainz
Eintracht Frankfurt v Union Berlin
Freiburg v RB Leipzig
Hoffenheim v Heidenheim
Holstein Kiel v Stuttgart
Wolfsburg v St Pauli

MARCH 15
Augsburg v Wolfsburg
Bochum v Eintracht Frankfurt
Heidenheim v Holstein Kiel
Mainz v Freiburg
RB Leipzig v Borussia Dortmund
St Pauli v Hoffenheim
Stuttgart v Bayer Leverkusen
Union Berlin v Bayern Munich
Werder Bremen v Borussia M'gladbach

MARCH 29
Bayer Leverkusen v Bochum
Bayern Munich v St Pauli
Borussia Dortmund v Mainz
Borussia M'gladbach v RB Leipzig
Eintracht Frankfurt v Stuttgart
Freiburg v Union Berlin
Hoffenheim v Augsburg
Holstein Kiel v Werder Bremen
Wolfsburg v Heidenheim

APRIL 5
Augsburg v Bayern Munich
Bochum v Stuttgart
Freiburg v Borussia Dortmund
Heidenheim v Bayer Leverkusen
Mainz v Holstein Kiel
RB Leipzig v Hoffenheim
St Pauli v Borussia M'gladbach
Union Berlin v Wolfsburg
Werder Bremen v Eintracht Frankfurt

APRIL 12
Bayer Leverkusen v Union Berlin
Bayern Munich v Borussia Dortmund
Bochum v Augsburg
Borussia M'gladbach v Freiburg
Eintracht Frankfurt v Heidenheim
Hoffenheim v Mainz
Holstein Kiel v St Pauli
Stuttgart v Werder Bremen
Wolfsburg v RB Leipzig

APRIL 19
Augsburg v Eintracht Frankfurt
Borussia Dortmund v Borussia M'gladbach
Freiburg v Hoffenheim
Heidenheim v Bayern Munich
Mainz v Wolfsburg
RB Leipzig v Holstein Kiel
St Pauli v Bayer Leverkusen
Union Berlin v Stuttgart
Werder Bremen v Bochum

APRIL 26
Bayer Leverkusen v Augsburg
Bayern Munich v Mainz
Bochum v Union Berlin
Eintracht Frankfurt v RB Leipzig
Hoffenheim v Borussia Dortmund
Holstein Kiel v Borussia M'gladbach
Stuttgart v Heidenheim
Werder Bremen v St Pauli
Wolfsburg v Freiburg

MAY 3
Augsburg v Holstein Kiel
Borussia Dortmund v Wolfsburg
Borussia M'gladbach v Hoffenheim
Freiburg v Bayer Leverkusen
Heidenheim v Bochum
Mainz v Eintracht Frankfurt
RB Leipzig v Bayern Munich
St Pauli v Stuttgart
Union Berlin v Werder Bremen

MAY 10
Bayer Leverkusen v Borussia Dortmund
Bayern Munich v Borussia M'gladbach
Bochum v Mainz
Eintracht Frankfurt v St Pauli
Holstein Kiel v Freiburg
Stuttgart v Augsburg
Union Berlin v Heidenheim
Werder Bremen v RB Leipzig
Wolfsburg v Hoffenheim

MAY 17
Augsburg v Union Berlin
Borussia Dortmund v Holstein Kiel
Borussia M'gladbach v Wolfsburg
Freiburg v Eintracht Frankfurt
Heidenheim v Werder Bremen
Hoffenheim v Bayern Munich
Mainz v Bayer Leverkusen
RB Leipzig v Stuttgart
St Pauli v Bochum

• *Televised games for October 5 onwards are yet to be announced. All fixtures are subject to change*

SERIE A FIXTURES 2024-25

AUGUST 17
Genoa v Internazionale
Parma v Fiorentina
Empoli v Monza
Milan v Torino

AUGUST 18
Bologna v Udinese
Verona v Napoli
Cagliari v Roma
Lazio v Venezia

AUGUST 19
Lecce v Atalanta
Juventus v Como

AUGUST 24
Parma v Milan
Udinese v Lazio
Internazionale v Lecce
Monza v Genoa

AUGUST 25
Fiorentina v Venezia
Torino v Atalanta
Napoli v Bologna
Roma v Empoli

AUGUST 26
Cagliari v Como
Verona v Juventus

AUGUST 30
Venezia v Torino
Internazionale v Atalanta

AUGUST 31
Bologna v Empoli
Lecce v Cagliari
Lazio v Milan
Napoli v Parma

SEPTEMBER 1
Fiorentina v Monza
Genoa v Verona
Juventus v Roma
Udinese v Como

SEPTEMBER 15
Atalanta v Fiorentina
Cagliari v Napoli
Como v Bologna
Empoli v Juventus
Genoa v Roma
Lazio v Verona
Milan v Venezia
Monza v Internazionale
Parma v Udinese
Torino v Lecce

SEPTEMBER 22
Atalanta v Como
Cagliari v Empoli
Fiorentina v Lazio
Internazionale v Milan
Juventus v Napoli
Lecce v Parma
Monza v Bologna
Roma v Udinese
Venezia v Genoa
Verona v Torino

SEPTEMBER 29
Bologna v Atalanta
Como v Verona
Empoli v Fiorentina
Genoa v Juventus
Milan v Lecce
Napoli v Monza
Parma v Cagliari
Roma v Venezia
Torino v Lazio
Udinese v Internazionale

OCTOBER 6
Atalanta v Genoa
Bologna v Parma
Fiorentina v Milan
Internazionale v Torino
Juventus v Cagliari
Lazio v Empoli
Monza v Roma
Napoli v Como
Udinese v Lecce
Verona v Venezia

OCTOBER 20
Cagliari v Torino
Como v Parma
Empoli v Napoli
Genoa v Bologna
Juventus v Lazio
Lecce v Fiorentina
Milan v Udinese
Roma v Internazionale
Venezia v Atalanta
Verona v Monza

OCTOBER 27
Atalanta v Verona
Bologna v Milan
Fiorentina v Roma
Internazionale v Juventus
Lazio v Genoa
Monza v Venezia
Napoli v Lecce
Parma v Empoli
Torino v Como
Udinese v Cagliari

OCTOBER 30
Atalanta v Monza
Cagliari v Bologna
Como v Lazio
Empoli v Internazionale
Genoa v Fiorentina
Juventus v Parma
Lecce v Verona
Milan v Napoli
Roma v Torino
Venezia v Udinese

NOVEMBER 3
Bologna v Lecce
Empoli v Como
Internazionale v Venezia
Lazio v Cagliari
Monza v Milan
Napoli v Atalanta
Parma v Genoa
Torino v Fiorentina
Udinese v Juventus
Verona v Roma

NOVEMBER 10
Atalanta v Udinese
Cagliari v Milan
Fiorentina v Verona
Genoa v Como
Internazionale v Napoli
Juventus v Torino
Lecce v Empoli
Monza v Lazio
Roma v Bologna
Venezia v Parma

NOVEMBER 24
Como v Fiorentina
Empoli v Udinese
Genoa v Cagliari
Lazio v Bologna
Milan v Juventus
Napoli v Roma
Parma v Atalanta
Torino v Monza
Venezia v Lecce
Verona v Internazionale

DECEMBER 1
Bologna v Venezia
Cagliari v Verona
Como v Monza
Fiorentina v Internazionale
Lecce v Juventus
Milan v Empoli
Parma v Lazio
Roma v Atalanta
Torino v Napoli
Udinese v Genoa

DECEMBER 8
Atalanta v Milan
Fiorentina v Cagliari
Genoa v Torino
Internazionale v Parma
Juventus v Bologna
Monza v Udinese
Napoli v Lazio
Roma v Lecce
Venezia v Como
Verona v Empoli

DECEMBER 15
Bologna v Fiorentina
Cagliari v Atalanta
Como v Roma
Empoli v Torino
Juventus v Venezia
Lazio v Internazionale

Milan derby...the San Siro will host last season's top two in September and February

Lecce v Monza
Milan v Genoa
Parma v Verona
Udinese v Napoli

DECEMBER 22
Atalanta v Empoli
Fiorentina v Udinese
Genoa v Napoli
Internazionale v Como
Lecce v Lazio
Monza v Juventus
Roma v Parma
Torino v Bologna
Venezia v Cagliari
Verona v Milan

DECEMBER 29
Bologna v Verona
Cagliari v Internazionale
Como v Lecce
Empoli v Genoa

New boys...starts don't come much tougher for Como, as the newly-promoted club begins life in Serie A against Juventus

Juventus v Fiorentina
Lazio v Atalanta
Milan v Roma
Napoli v Venezia
Parma v Monza
Udinese v Torino

JANUARY 5

Atalanta v Juventus
Como v Milan
Fiorentina v Napoli
Internazionale v Bologna
Lecce v Genoa
Monza v Cagliari
Roma v Lazio
Torino v Parma
Venezia v Empoli
Verona v Udinese

JANUARY 12

Bologna v Roma
Empoli v Lecce
Genoa v Parma
Lazio v Como
Milan v Cagliari
Monza v Fiorentina
Napoli v Verona
Torino v Juventus
Udinese v Atalanta
Venezia v Internazionale

JANUARY 19

Atalanta v Napoli
Bologna v Monza
Cagliari v Lecce
Como v Udinese
Fiorentina v Torino
Internazionale v Empoli
Juventus v Milan
Parma v Venezia
Roma v Genoa
Verona v Lazio

JANUARY 26

Como v Atalanta
Empoli v Bologna
Genoa v Monza
Lazio v Fiorentina
Lecce v Internazionale
Milan v Parma
Napoli v Juventus
Torino v Cagliari
Udinese v Roma
Venezia v Verona

FEBRUARY 2

Atalanta v Torino
Bologna v Como
Cagliari v Lazio
Fiorentina v Genoa
Juventus v Empoli
Milan v Internazionale
Monza v Verona
Parma v Lecce
Roma v Napoli
Udinese v Venezia

FEBRUARY 9

Cagliari v Parma
Como v Juventus
Empoli v Milan
Internazionale v Fiorentina
Lazio v Monza
Lecce v Bologna
Napoli v Udinese
Torino v Genoa
Venezia v Roma
Verona v Atalanta

FEBRUARY 16

Atalanta v Cagliari
Bologna v Torino
Fiorentina v Como
Genoa v Venezia
Juventus v Internazionale
Lazio v Napoli
Milan v Verona
Monza v Lecce
Parma v Roma
Udinese v Empoli

FEBRUARY 23

Cagliari v Juventus
Como v Napoli
Empoli v Atalanta
Internazionale v Genoa
Lecce v Udinese
Parma v Bologna
Roma v Monza
Torino v Milan
Venezia v Lazio
Verona v Fiorentina

MARCH 2

Atalanta v Venezia
Bologna v Cagliari
Fiorentina v Lecce
Genoa v Empoli
Juventus v Verona
Milan v Lazio
Monza v Torino
Napoli v Internazionale
Roma v Como
Udinese v Parma

MARCH 9

Cagliari v Genoa
Como v Venezia
Empoli v Roma
Internazionale v Monza
Juventus v Atalanta
Lazio v Udinese
Lecce v Milan
Napoli v Fiorentina
Parma v Torino
Verona v Bologna

MARCH 16

Atalanta v Internazionale
Bologna v Lazio
Fiorentina v Juventus
Genoa v Lecce
Milan v Como
Monza v Parma
Roma v Cagliari
Torino v Empoli
Udinese v Verona
Venezia v Napoli

MARCH 30

Cagliari v Monza
Como v Empoli
Fiorentina v Atalanta
Internazionale v Udinese
Juventus v Genoa
Lazio v Torino
Lecce v Roma
Napoli v Milan
Venezia v Bologna
Verona v Parma

APRIL 6

Atalanta v Lazio
Bologna v Napoli
Empoli v Cagliari
Genoa v Udinese
Lecce v Venezia
Milan v Fiorentina
Monza v Como
Parma v Internazionale
Roma v Juventus
Torino v Verona

APRIL 13

Atalanta v Bologna
Como v Torino
Fiorentina v Parma
Internazionale v Cagliari
Juventus v Lecce
Lazio v Roma
Napoli v Empoli
Udinese v Milan
Venezia v Monza
Verona v Genoa

APRIL 20

Bologna v Internazionale
Cagliari v Fiorentina
Empoli v Venezia
Genoa v Lazio
Lecce v Como
Milan v Atalanta
Monza v Napoli
Parma v Juventus
Roma v Verona
Torino v Udinese

APRIL 27

Atalanta v Lecce
Como v Genoa
Fiorentina v Empoli
Internazionale v Roma
Juventus v Monza
Lazio v Parma
Napoli v Torino
Udinese v Bologna
Venezia v Milan
Verona v Cagliari

MAY 4

Bologna v Juventus
Cagliari v Udinese
Empoli v Lazio
Genoa v Milan
Internazionale v Verona
Lecce v Napoli
Monza v Atalanta
Parma v Como
Roma v Fiorentina
Torino v Venezia

MAY 11

Atalanta v Roma
Como v Cagliari
Empoli v Parma
Lazio v Juventus
Milan v Bologna
Napoli v Genoa
Torino v Internazionale
Udinese v Monza
Venezia v Fiorentina
Verona v Lecce

MAY 18

Cagliari v Venezia
Fiorentina v Bologna
Genoa v Atalanta
Internazionale v Lazio
Juventus v Udinese
Lecce v Torino
Monza v Empoli
Parma v Napoli
Roma v Milan
Verona v Como

MAY 25

Atalanta v Parma
Bologna v Genoa
Como v Internazionale
Empoli v Verona
Lazio v Lecce
Milan v Monza
Napoli v Cagliari
Torino v Roma
Udinese v Fiorentina
Venezia v Juventus

Derby della Capitale **...Lazio take on arch-rivals Roma in April**

•Televised games for September 15 onwards are yet to be announced. All fixtures are subject to change

LIGUE 1 FIXTURES 2024-25

AUGUST 16
Le Havre v Paris Saint-Germain

AUGUST 17
Brest v Marseille
Reims v Lille
Monaco v Saint-Etienne

AUGUST 18
Auxerre v Nice
Angers v Lens
Montpellier v Strasbourg
Toulouse v Nantes
Rennes v Lyon

AUGUST 25
Lens v Brest
Lille v Angers
Lyon v Monaco
Marseille v Reims
Nantes v Auxerre
Nice v Toulouse
Paris Saint-Germain v Montpellier
Saint-Etienne v Le Havre
Strasbourg v Rennes

SEPTEMBER 1
Angers v Nice
Brest v Saint-Etienne
Le Havre v Auxerre
Lille v Paris Saint-Germain
Lyon v Strasbourg
Monaco v Lens
Montpellier v Nantes
Reims v Rennes
Toulouse v Marseille

SEPTEMBER 15
Auxerre v Monaco
Lens v Lyon
Marseille v Nice
Nantes v Reims
Paris Saint-Germain v Brest
Rennes v Montpellier
Toulouse v Le Havre
Saint-Etienne v Lille
Strasbourg v Angers

SEPTEMBER 22
Angers v Nantes
Brest v Toulouse
Lille v Strasbourg
Lyon v Marseille
Monaco v Le Havre
Montpellier v Auxerre
Nice v Saint-Etienne
Reims v Paris Saint-Germain
Rennes v Lens

SEPTEMBER 29
Angers v Reims
Auxerre v Brest
Le Havre v Lille
Lens v Nice
Monaco v Montpellier
Nantes v Saint-Etienne
Paris Saint-Germain v Rennes
Strasbourg v Marseille
Toulouse v Lyon

OCTOBER 6
Brest v Le Havre
Lille v Toulouse
Lyon v Nantes
Marseille v Angers
Nice v Paris Saint-Germain
Reims v Montpellier
Rennes v Monaco
Saint-Etienne v Auxerre
Strasbourg v Lens

OCTOBER 20
Auxerre v Reims
Brest v Rennes
Le Havre v Lyon
Monaco v Lille
Montpellier v Marseille
Nantes v Nice
Paris Saint-Germain v Strasbourg
Saint-Etienne v Lens
Toulouse v Angers

OCTOBER 27
Angers v Saint-Etienne
Lens v Lille
Lyon v Auxerre
Marseille v Paris Saint-Germain
Montpellier v Toulouse
Nice v Monaco
Reims v Brest
Rennes v Le Havre
Strasbourg v Nantes

NOVEMBER 3
Auxerre v Rennes
Brest v Nice
Le Havre v Montpellier
Lille v Lyon
Monaco v Angers
Nantes v Marseille
Paris Saint-Germain v Lens
Saint-Etienne v Strasbourg
Toulouse v Reims

NOVEMBER 10
Angers v Paris Saint-Germain
Le Havre v Reims
Lens v Nantes
Lyon v Saint-Etienne
Marseille v Auxerre
Montpellier v Brest
Nice v Lille
Rennes v Toulouse
Strasbourg v Monaco

NOVEMBER 24
Auxerre v Angers
Lens v Marseille
Lille v Rennes
Monaco v Brest
Nantes v Le Havre
Nice v Strasbourg
Paris Saint-Germain v Toulouse
Reims v Lyon
Saint-Etienne v Montpellier

DECEMBER 1
Brest v Strasbourg
Le Havre v Angers
Lyon v Nice
Marseille v Monaco
Montpellier v Lille
Paris Saint-Germain v Nantes
Reims v Lens
Rennes v Saint-Etienne
Toulouse v Auxerre

DECEMBER 8
Angers v Lyon
Auxerre v Paris Saint-Germain
Lens v Montpellier
Lille v Brest
Monaco v Toulouse
Nantes v Rennes
Nice v Le Havre
Saint-Etienne v Marseille
Strasbourg v Reims

DECEMBER 15
Auxerre v Lens
Brest v Nantes
Le Havre v Strasbourg
Marseille v Lille
Montpellier v Nice
Paris Saint-Germain v Lyon
Reims v Monaco
Rennes v Angers
Toulouse v Saint-Etienne

JANUARY 5
Angers v Brest
Lens v Toulouse
Lille v Nantes
Lyon v Montpellier
Marseille v Le Havre
Monaco v Paris Saint-Germain
Nice v Rennes
Saint-Etienne v Reims
Strasbourg v Auxerre

Marseille v PSG...the first *Le Classique* of 2024-25 takes place at the Velodrome in late October

European hopefuls...Brest and Lyon, who face-off in January, will be aiming to qualify for Europe again

JANUARY 12
Auxerre v Lille
Brest v Lyon
Le Havre v Lens
Montpellier v Angers
Nantes v Monaco
Paris Saint-Germain v Saint-Etienne
Reims v Nice
Rennes v Marseille
Toulouse v Strasbourg

JANUARY 19
Angers v Auxerre
Lens v Paris Saint-Germain
Lille v Nice
Lyon v Toulouse
Marseille v Strasbourg
Montpellier v Monaco
Reims v Le Havre
Rennes v Brest
Saint-Etienne v Nantes

JANUARY 26
Auxerre v Saint-Etienne
Le Havre v Brest
Lens v Angers
Monaco v Rennes
Nantes v Lyon
Nice v Marseille
Paris Saint-Germain v Reims
Toulouse v Montpellier
Strasbourg v Lille

FEBRUARY 2
Angers v Le Havre
Brest v Paris Saint-Germain
Lille v Saint-Etienne
Marseille v Lyon
Monaco v Auxerre
Montpellier v Lens
Reims v Nantes
Rennes v Strasbourg
Toulouse v Nice

FEBRUARY 9
Angers v Marseille
Auxerre v Toulouse
Lille v Le Havre
Lyon v Reims
Nantes v Brest
Nice v Lens
Paris Saint-Germain v Monaco
Saint-Etienne v Rennes
Strasbourg v Montpellier

FEBRUARY 16
Brest v Auxerre
Le Havre v Nice
Lens v Strasbourg
Marseille v Saint-Etienne
Monaco v Nantes
Montpellier v Lyon
Reims v Angers
Rennes v Lille
Toulouse v Paris Saint-Germain

FEBRUARY 23
Auxerre v Marseille
Le Havre v Toulouse
Lille v Monaco
Lyon v Paris Saint-Germain
Nantes v Lens
Nice v Montpellier
Rennes v Reims
Saint-Etienne v Angers
Strasbourg v Brest

MARCH 2
Angers v Toulouse
Auxerre v Strasbourg
Lens v Le Havre
Lyon v Brest
Marseille v Nantes
Monaco v Reims
Montpellier v Rennes
Paris Saint-Germain v Lille
Saint-Etienne v Nice

MARCH 9
Brest v Angers
Le Havre v Saint-Etienne
Lille v Montpellier
Marseille v Lens
Nantes v Strasbourg
Nice v Lyon
Reims v Auxerre
Rennes v Paris Saint-Germain
Toulouse v Monaco

MARCH 16
Angers v Monaco
Brest v Reims
Lens v Rennes
Lyon v Le Havre
Montpellier v Saint-Etienne
Nantes v Lille
Nice v Auxerre
Paris Saint-Germain v Marseille
Strasbourg v Toulouse

MARCH 30
Angers v Rennes
Auxerre v Montpellier
Le Havre v Nantes
Lille v Lens
Monaco v Nice
Reims v Marseille
Saint-Etienne v Paris Saint-Germain
Strasbourg v Lyon
Toulouse v Brest

APRIL 6
Brest v Monaco
Lens v Saint-Etienne
Lyon v Lille
Marseille v Toulouse
Montpellier v Le Havre
Nice v Nantes
Paris Saint-Germain v Angers
Reims v Strasbourg
Rennes v Auxerre

APRIL 13
Angers v Montpellier
Auxerre v Lyon
Le Havre v Rennes
Lens v Reims
Monaco v Marseille
Nantes v Paris Saint-Germain
Saint-Etienne v Brest
Strasbourg v Nice
Toulouse v Lille

APRIL 20
Brest v Lens
Lille v Auxerre
Marseille v Montpellier
Monaco v Strasbourg
Nice v Angers
Reims v Toulouse
Rennes v Nantes
Paris Saint-Germain v Le Havre
Saint-Etienne v Lyon

APRIL 27
Angers v Lille
Le Havre v Monaco
Lens v Auxerre
Lyon v Rennes
Marseille v Brest
Montpellier v Reims
Nantes v Toulouse
Paris Saint-Germain v Nice
Strasbourg v Saint-Etienne

MAY 4
Auxerre v Le Havre
Brest v Montpellier
Lille v Marseille
Lyon v Lens
Nantes v Angers
Nice v Reims
Saint-Etienne v Monaco
Strasbourg v Paris Saint-Germain
Toulouse v Rennes

MAY 11
Angers v Strasbourg
Auxerre v Nantes
Brest v Lille
Le Havre v Marseille
Monaco v Lyon
Montpellier v Paris Saint-Germain
Reims v Saint-Etienne
Rennes v Nice
Toulouse v Lens

MAY 18
Lens v Monaco
Lille v Reims
Lyon v Angers
Marseille v Rennes
Nantes v Montpellier
Nice v Brest
Paris Saint-Germain v Auxerre
Saint-Etienne v Toulouse
Strasbourg v Le Havre

Final-day showdown... Strasbourg and Le Havre will be hoping their May clash isn't a relegation decider

•Televised games for August 25 onwards are yet to be announced. All fixtures are subject to change

Internationals

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

SOUTH AMERICA fixtures
● *6 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Matchdays 7-8
Sep 5-6:
Bolivia v Venezuela; Argentina v Chile; Uruguay v Paraguay; Brazil v Ecuador; Peru v Colombia
Sep 10:
Colombia v Argentina; Chile v Bolivia; Ecuador v Peru; Venezuela v Uruguay; Paraguay v Brazil

ASIA fixtures
● *8 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Group A
Sep 5: Iran v Kyrgyzstan; Qatar v United Arab Emirates; Uzbekistan v North Korea
Sep 10: United Arab Emirates v Iran; Kyrgyzstan v Uzbekistan; North Korea v Qatar

Group B
Sep 5: South Korea v Palestine; Iraq v Oman; Jordan v Kuwait
Sep 10: Oman v South Korea; Palestine v Jordan; Kuwait v Iraq

Group C
Sep 5: Japan v China; Australia v Bahrain; Saudi Arabia v Indonesia
Sep 10: Bahrain v Japan; China v Saudi Arabia; Indonesia v Australia

OCEANIA fixtures
● *1 direct slot available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Pre-Qualifiers
Sep 7:
Cook Islands v Tonga; American Samoa v Samoa
Sep 10:
Cook Islands/Tonga v American Samoa/Samoa

Group Stage

Group A
Solomon Islands, Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea

Group B
New Zealand, Tahiti, Vanuatu, Qualifying winner

• *Group stage takes place Oct 7-Nov 19.*

2024-25 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

Group A1
Sep 5: Portugal v Croatia; Scotland v Poland
Sep 8: Croatia v Poland; Portugal v Scotland

Group A2
Sep 6: Belgium v Israel; France v Italy
Sep 9: France v Belgium; Israel v Italy

Group A3
Sep 7: Germany v Hungary; Netherlands v Bosnia & Herzegovina
Sep 10: Hungary v Bosnia & Herzegovina; Netherlands v Germany

Group A4
Sep 5: Denmark v Switzerland; Serbia v Spain
Sep 8: Denmark v Serbia; Switzerland v Spain

Group B1
Sep 7: Georgia v Czech Rep; Ukraine v Albania
Sep 10: Albania v Georgia; Czech Rep v Ukraine

Group B2
Sep 7:
Republic of Ireland v England; Greece v Finland
Sep 10:
England v Finland; Republic of Ireland v Greece

Group B3
Sep 6: Kazakhstan v Norway; Slovenia v Austria
Sep 9: Norway v Austria; Slovenia v Kazakhstan

Group B4
Sep 6: Iceland v Montenegro; Wales v Turkey
Sep 9: Montenegro v Wales; Turkey v Iceland

Group C1
Sep 5: Azerbaijan v Sweden; Estonia v Slovakia
Sep 8: Slovakia v Azerbaijan; Sweden v Estonia

Group C2
Sep 6: Kosovo v Romania; Lithuania v Cyprus
Sep 9: Cyprus v Kosovo; Romania v Lithuania

Group C3
Sep 5: Belarus v Bulgaria; N. Ireland v Luxembourg
Sep 8: Luxembourg v Belarus; Bulgaria v N. Ireland

Group C4
Sep 7: Faroe Isl v N. Macedonia; Armenia v Latvia
Sep 10: Latvia v Faroe Isl; N. Macedonia v Armenia

Group D1
Sep 5: San Marino v Liechtenstein
Sep 8: Gibraltar v Liechtenstein

Group D2
Sep 7: Moldova v Malta
Sep 10: Andorra v Malta

2024-25 CONCACAF NATIONS LEAGUE

Group A1
Sep 5: Costa Rica v Guadeloupe; Guyana v Suriname; Guatemala v Martinique
Sep 9: Guatemala v Costa Rica; Guadeloupe v Suriname; Martinique v Guyana

Group A2
Sep 6: Jamaica v Cuba; French Guiana v Nicaragua; Honduras v Trinidad & Tobago
Sep 10: Honduras v Jamaica; Cuba v Nicaragua; Trinidad & Tobago v French Guiana
• *Canada, Mexico, Panama and USA receive byes*

Group B1
Sep 4: Montserrat v El Salvador; Bonaire v St Vincent & Grenadines
Sep 7: El Salvador v Bonaire; St Vincent & Grenadines v Montserrat

Group B2
Sep 5: St Lucia v Curacao; Saint Martin v Grenada
Sep 8: Curacao v Saint Martin; Grenada v St Lucia

Group B3
Sep 5: Puerto Rico v Haiti; Sint Maarten v Aruba
Sep 8: Haiti v Sint Maarten; Aruba v Puerto Rico

Group B4
Sep 6: Bermuda v Dominican Republic; Dominica v Antigua & Barbuda
Sep 9: Dominican Republic v Dominica; Antigua & Barbuda v Bermuda

Group C1
Sep 4: US Virgin Islands v Bahamas
Sep 7: Bahamas v Barbados
Sep 10: Barbados v US Virgin Islands

Group C2
Sep 4: Anguilla v Turks & Caicos
Sep 7: Turks & Caicos v Belize
Sep 10: Belize v Anguilla

Group C3
Sep 4: British Virgin Islands v Cayman Islands
Sep 7: Cayman Islands v St Kitts & Nevis
Sep 10: St Kitts & Nevis v British Virgin Islands

AFCON 2025 QUALIFYING

Group A
Sep 2: Tunisia v Madagascar; Comoros v Gambia
Sep 6: Gambia v Tunisia; Madagascar v Comoros

Group B
Sep 2: Morocco v Gabon; Central Africa Republic v Lesotho
Sep 6: Lesotho v Morocco; Gabon v Central Africa Republic

Group C
Sep 2: Egypt v Cape Verde; Mauritania v Botswana
Sep 6: Botswana v Egypt; Cape Verde v Mauritania

Group D
Sep 2: Nigeria v Benin; Libya v Rwanda
Sep 6: Rwanda v Nigeria; Benin v Libya

Group E
Sep 2: Algeria v Equatorial Guinea; Togo v Liberia
Sep 6: Liberia v Algeria; Equatorial Guinea v Togo

Group F
Sep 2: Ghana v Angola; Sudan v Niger
Sep 6: Niger v Ghana; Angola v Sudan

Group G
Sep 2: Ivory Coast v Zambia; Sierra Leone v Chad
Sep 6: Chad v Ivory Coast; Zambia v Sierra Leone

Group H
Sep 2: DR Congo v Guinea; Tanzania v Ethiopia
Sep 6: Ethiopia v DR Congo; Guinea v Tanzania

Group I
Sep 2:
Mali v Mozambique; Guinea-Bissau v Eswatini
Sep 6:
Eswatini v Mali; Mozambique v Guinea-Bissau

Group J
Sep 2: Cameroon v Namibia; Kenya v Zimbabwe
Sep 6: Zimbabwe v Cameroon; Namibia v Kenya

Group K
Sep 2: S. Africa v Uganda; Congo v South Sudan
Sep 6: South Sudan v S. Africa; Uganda v Congo

Group L
Sep 2: Senegal v Burkina Faso; Malawi v Burundi
Sep 6: Burundi v Senegal; Burkina Faso v Malawi

ASIAN CUP 2027 QUALIFYING

Play-Offs
Sep 5: Sri Lanka v Cambodia; Timor-Leste v Mongolia; Brunei v Macau
Sep 10: Cambodia v Sri Lanka; Mongolia v Timor-Leste; Macau v Brunei

2024 MEN'S OLYMPICS

Group A

Jul 25 – Nice
Guinea 1 (Diawara 72)
New Zealand 2 (Garbett 25, Waine 76)

Jul 25 – Marseille
France 3 (Lacazette 61, Olise 69, Bade 85)
United States 0

Jul 28 – Marseille
New Zealand 1 (Randall 78)
United States 4 (Mihailovic 8 pen, Zimmerman 12, Busio 30, P. Aaronson 58)

Jul 27 – Nice
France 1 (Sildillia 75)
Guinea 0

Jul 30 – Marseille
New Zealand 0
France 3 (Mateta 19, Doue 71, Kalimuendo 74)

Jul 30 – Saint-Etienne
United States 3 (Mihailovic 14, Paredes 31, 75)
Guinea 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
France (Q)	3	3	0	0	7	0	9
USA (Q)	3	2	0	1	7	4	6
New Zealand	3	1	0	2	3	8	3
Guinea	3	0	0	3	1	6	0

Group B

Jul 24 – Saint-Etienne
Argentina 1 (Simeone 68)
Morocco 2 (Rahimi 45+2, 51 pen)

Jul 24 – Lyon
Iraq 2 (Hussein 57 pen, Jasim 75)
Ukraine 1 (Rubchynskyi 53)

Jul 27 – Lyon
Argentina 3 (Almada 14, Gondou 62, Fernandez 85)
Iraq 1 (Hussein 45+5)

Jul 27 – Saint-Etienne
Ukraine 2 (Kryskiv 22, Krasnopir 90+8)
Morocco 1 (Rahimi 64 pen)

Jul 30 – Lyon
Ukraine 0
Argentina 2 (Almada 47, Echeverri 90+1)

Jul 30 – Nice
Morocco 3 (Richardson 19, Rahimi 28, Ezzalzouli 36)
Iraq 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Morocco (Q)	3	2	0	1	6	3	6
Argentina (Q)	3	2	0	1	6	3	6
Ukraine	3	1	0	2	3	5	3
Iraq	3	1	0	2	3	7	3

Group C

Jul 24 – Paris
Uzbekistan 1 (Shomurodov 45+3)
Spain 2 (Pubill 28, Gomez 62)

Jul 24 – Nantes
Egypt 0
Dominican Republic 0

Jul 27 – Bordeaux
Dominican Republic 1 (Montes de Oca 38)
Spain 3 (Fermin 24, Baena 55, Gutierrez 70)

Jul 27 – Nantes
Uzbekistan 0
Egypt 1 (Koka 11)

Jul 30 – Paris
Dominican Republic 1 (Nunez 51 pen)
Uzbekistan 1 (Odilov 58)

Jul 30 – Bordeaux
Spain 1 (Omorodion 90)
Egypt 2 (Adel 40, 62)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Egypt (Q)	3	2	1	0	3	1	7
Spain (Q)	3	2	0	1	6	4	6
Dominican Rep	3	0	2	1	2	4	2
Uzbekistan	3	0	1	2	2	4	1

Group D

Jul 24 – Bordeaux
Japan 5 (Mito 18, 63, Yamamoto 69, Fujio 81, 87)
Paraguay 0

Jul 24 – Paris
Mali 1 (Doumbia 63)
Israel 1 (H. Diallo 56 og)

Jul 27 – Paris
Israel 2 (Gandelman 53, Gloukh 80)
Paraguay 4 (M. Fernandez 25, 90+6, Enciso 69, Balbuena 90+3)

Jul 27 – Bordeaux
Japan 1 (Yamamoto 82)
Mali 0

Jul 30 – Nantes
Israel 0
Japan 1 (Hosoya 90+1)

Jul 30 – Paris
Paraguay 1 (M. Fernandez 5)
Mali 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Japan (Q)	3	3	0	0	7	0	9
Paraguay (Q)	3	2	0	1	5	7	6
Mali	3	0	1	2	1	3	1
Israel	3	0	1	2	3	6	1

Quarter-Finals

Aug 2 – Paris
Morocco 4 (Rahimi 29 pen, Akhomach 63, Hakimi 70, Maouhoub 90+1 pen)
United States 0

Aug 2 – Lyon
Japan 0
Spain 3 (Fermin 11, 73, Ruiz 86)

Aug 2 – Marseille
Egypt 1 (Adel 88)
Paraguay 1 (D. Gomez 71)
After Extra-Time. Egypt win 5-4 on pens

Aug 2 – Bordeaux
France 1 (Mateta 5)
Argentina 0

Semi-Finals

Aug 5 – Marseille
Morocco 1 (Rahimi 37 pen)
Spain 2 (Fermin 65, Juanlu 86)

Aug 5 – Lyon
France 3 (Mateta 83, 99, Olise 108)
Egypt 1 (Saber 62)
After Extra-Time

Bronze Medal Match

Aug 8 – Nantes
Egypt 0
Morocco 6 (Ezzalzouli 23, Rahimi 26, 64, El Khannouss 51, Nakach 73, Hakimi 87)

Gold Medal Match

Aug 9 – Paris
France 3 (Millot 11, Akliouche 79, Mateta 90+3 pen)
Spain 5 (Fermin 18, 25, Baena 28, Camello 100, 120+1)
After Extra-Time

2024 WOMEN'S OLYMPICS

Group A

Jul 25 – Saint-Etienne
Canada 2 (Lacasse 45+4, Viens 79)
New Zealand 1 (Barry 13)

Jul 25 – Lyon
France 3 (Katoto 6, 42, Dali 18)
Colombia 2 (Usme 54 pen, Pavi 64)

Jul 28 – Lyon
New Zealand 0
Colombia 2 (Restrepo 27, Santos 72)

Jul 28 – Saint-Etienne
France 1 (Katoto 42)
Canada 2 (Fleming 58, Gilles 90+12)

Jul 31 – Lyon
New Zealand 1 (Taylor 43)
France 2 (Katoto 22, 49)

Jul 31 – Nice
Colombia 0
Canada 1 (Gilles 61)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
France (Q)	3	2	0	1	6	5	6
Canada* (Q)	3	3	0	0	5	2	3
Colombia (Q)	3	1	0	2	4	4	3
New Zealand	3	0	0	3	2	6	3

**Deducted 6 points*

Group B

Jul 25 – Marseille
Germany 3 (Hegering 24, Schuller 64, Brand 68)
Australia 0

Jul 25 – Nice
United States 3 (Rodman 17, Swanson 24, 25)
Zambia 0

Jul 28 – Nice
Australia 6 (Kennedy 7, Raso 35, Musole 58 og, Catley 65, 78 pen, Heyman 90)
Zambia 5 (B. Banda 1, 33, 45+2, Kundananji 21, 56)

Jul 28 – Marseille
United States 4 (Smith 11, 44, Swanson 26, Williams 89)
Germany 1 (Gwinn 22)

Jul 31 – Marseille
Australia 1 (Kennedy 90+2)
United States 2 (Rodman 43, Albert 77)

Jul 31 – Saint-Etienne
Zambia 1 (B. Banda 49)
Germany 4 (Schuller 10, 61, Buhl 47, Senss 90+5)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
United States (Q)	3	3	0	0	9	2	9
Germany (Q)	3	2	0	1	8	5	6
Australia	3	1	0	2	7	10	3
Zambia	3	0	0	3	6	13	0

Group C

Jul 25 – Nantes
Spain 2 (Bonmati 22, Caldentey 74)
Japan 1 (Fujino 13)

Jul 25 – Bordeaux
Nigeria 0
Brazil 1 (Gabi Nunes 37)

Jul 28 – Paris
Brazil 1 (Jhennifer 56)
Japan 2 (Kumagai 90+2 pen, Tanikawa 90+6)

Jul 28 – Nantes
Spain 1 (Putellas 85)
Nigeria 0

Jul 31 – Bordeaux
Brazil 0
Spain 2 (Del Castillo 68, Putellas 90+17)

Jul 31 – Nantes
Japan 3 (Hamano 22, Tanaka 32, Kitagawa 45+5)
Nigeria 1 (Echegini 42)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Spain (Q)	3	3	0	0	5	1	9
Japan (Q)	3	2	0	1	6	4	6
Brazil (Q)	3	1	0	2	2	4	3
Nigeria	3	0	0	3	1	5	0

Quarter-Finals

Aug 3 – Paris
United States 1 (Rodman 105+2)
Japan 0
After Extra-Time

Aug 3 – Lyon
Spain 2 (Hermoso 79, Paredes 90+7)
Colombia 2 (Ramirez 12, Santos 52)
After Extra-Time. Spain win 4-2 on pens

Aug 3 – Marseille
Canada 0
Germany 0
After Extra-Time. Germany win 4-2 on pens

Aug 3 – Nantes
France 0
Brazil 1 (Gabi Portilho 82)

Semi-Finals

Aug 6 – Lyon
United States 1 (Smith 95)
Germany 0
After Extra-Time

Aug 6 – Marseille
Brazil 4 (Paredes 6 og, Portilho 45, Adriana 72, Kerolin 90+1)
Spain 2 (Duda 85 og, Paralluelo 90+12)

Bronze Medal Match

Aug 9 – Lyon
Spain 0
Germany 1 (Gwinn 65 pen)

Gold Medal Match

Aug 10 – Paris
Brazil 0
United States 1 (Swanson 57)

Club Football
EUROPE

2024-25 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

First Qualifying Round – Champions Path

Jul 9-10: The New Saints (Wal) 3-0 Decic (Mne); Hamrun Spartans (Mal) 0-1 Lincoln Red Imps (Gib); UE Santa Colomba (And) 1-2 Ballkani (Kos); Panevezys (Ltu) 3-0 HJK (Fin); Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) 0-0 Shamrock Rovers (Irl); Virtus (Smr) 1-7 FCSB (Rou); Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 4-2 Struga (Mkd); Borac Banja Luka (Bih) 1-0 Egnatia (Alb); Flora (Est) 0-5 Celje (Svn); KI (Fro) 2-0 Differdange 03 (Lux); RFS (Lva) 3-0 Larne (Nir); Ludogorets (Bul) 3-1 Dinamo Batumi (Geo); Ordabasy (Kaz) 0-0 Petrocub Hincesti (Mda); Dinamo Minsk (Blr) 0-0 Pyunik (Arm)
Jul 16-17: Decic 1-1 The New Saints (Wal) (agg 1-4); Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 0-1 Hamrun Spartans (Mal) (agg 1-1, *AET, Lincoln Red Imps win 5-4 on pens*); Ballkani (Kos) 1-2 UE Santa Colomba (And) (agg 3-3, *AET, UE Santa Coloma win 6-5 on pens*); HJK (Fin) 1-1 Panevezys (Ltu) (agg 1-4); Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 2-1 Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) (agg 2-1); FCSB (Rou) 4-0 Virtus (Smr) (agg 11-1); Struga (Mkd) 1-2 Slovan Bratislava (Svk) (agg 3-6); Dinamo Batumi (Geo) 1-0 Ludogorets (Bul) (agg 2-3); Egnatia (Alb) 2-1 Borac Banja Luka (Bih) (agg 2-2, *AET, Borac Banja Luka win 4-1 on pens*); Celje (Svn) 2-1 Flora (Est) (agg 7-1); Differdange 03 (Lux) 0-0 KI (Fro) (agg 0-2); Larne (Nir) 0-4 RFS (Lva) (agg 0-7); Petrocub Hincesti (Mda) 1-0 Ordabasy (Kaz) (agg 1-0); Pyunik (Arm) 0-1 Dinamo Minsk (Blr) (agg 0-1)

Second Qualifying Round – Champions Path

Jul 23-24: APOEL (Cyp) 1-0 Petrocub Hincesti (Mda); Ferencvaros (Hun) 5-0 The New Saints (Wal); Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 4-0 RFS (Lva); Malmo (Swe) 4-1 KI (Fro); Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 0-2 Sparta Prague (Cze); UE Santa Colomba (And) 0-3 Midtjylland (Den); Panevezys (Ltu) 0-4 Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol); Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 0-2 Qarabag (Aze); FCSB (Rou) 1-1 Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr); Ludogorets (Bul) 2-0 Dinamo Minsk (Blr); PAOK (Gre) 3-2 Borac Banja Luka (Bih); Celje (Svn) 1-1 Slovan Bratislava (Svk)
Jul 30-31: Petrocub Hincesti (Mda) 1-1 APOEL (Cyp) (agg 1-2); The New Saints (Wal) 1-2 Ferencvaros (Hun) (agg 1-7); KI (Fro) 3-2 Malmo (Swe) (agg 4-6); Sparta Prague (Cze) 4-2 Shamrock Rovers (Irl) (agg 6-2); Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 5-0 Celje (Svn) (agg 6-1); Qarabag (Aze) 5-0 Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) (agg 7-0); Dinamo Minsk (Blr) 1-0 Ludogorets (Bul) (agg 1-2); Borac Banja Luka (Bih) 0-1 PAOK (Gre) (agg 2-4); RFS (Lva) 1-3 Bodo/Glimt (Nor) (agg 1-7); Midtjylland (Den) 1-0 UE Santa Colomba (And) (agg 4-0); Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 3-1 Panevezys (Ltu) (agg 7-1); Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 0-1 FCSB (Rou) (agg 1-2)

Second Qualifying Round – League Path

Jul 23: Lugano (Sui) 3-4 Fenerbahce (Tur); Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 6-2 Partizan Belgrade (Srb)
Jul 30-31: Fenerbahce (Tur) 2-1 Lugano (Sui) (agg 6-4); Partizan Belgrade (Srb) 0-3 Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) (agg 2-9)

2024-25 EUROPA LEAGUE

First Qualifying Round – Main Path

Jul 11: Botev Plovdiv (Bul) 2-1 Maribor (Svn); Elfsborg (Swe) 3-0 Pafos (Cyp); Paks (Hun) 0-4 Corvinul Hunedoara (Rou); Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) 0-1 Zira (Aze); Wisla Krakow (Pol) 2-0 Llapi (Kos); Ruzomberok (Svk) 5-2 Tobol (Kaz)
Jul 18: Maribor (Svn) 2-2 Botev Plovdiv (Bul) (agg 3-4); Pafos (Cyp) 2-5 Elfsborg (Swe) (agg 2-8); Corvinul Hunedoara (Rou) 0-2 Paks (Hun) (agg 4-2); Zira (Aze) 1-2 Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) (agg 2-2, *AET, Sheriff Tiraspol win 5-4 on pens*); Llapi (Kos) 1-2 Wisla Krakow (Pol) (agg 1-4); Tobol (Kaz) 1-0 Ruzomberok (Svk) (agg 3-5)

Second Qualifying Round – Main Path

Jul 25: Ajax (Ned) 1-0 Vojvodina (Srb); Ruzomberok (Svk) 0-2 Trabzonspor (Tur); Wisla Krakow (Pol) 1-2 Rapid Vienna (Aut); Kilmarnock (Sco) 1-1 Cercle Brugge (Bel); Molde (Nor) 3-1 Silkeborg (Den); Corvinul Hunedoara (Rou) 0-0 Rijeka (Cro); Braga (Por) 2-0 Maccabi Petah Tikva (Isr); Panathinaikos (Gre) 2-1 Botev Plovdiv (Bul); Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) 0-1 Elfsborg (Swe)
Aug 1: Vojvodina (Srb) 1-3 Ajax (Ned) (agg 1-4); Trabzonspor (Tur) 1-0 Ruzomberok (Svk) (agg 3-0); Rapid Vienna (Aut) 6-1 Wisla Krakow (Pol) (agg 8-2); Cercle Brugge (Bel) 1-0 Kilmarnock (Sco) (agg 2-1); Silkeborg (Den) 3-2 Molde (Nor) (agg 4-5); Rijeka (Cro) 1-0 Corvinul Hunedoara (Rou) (agg 1-0); Maccabi Petah Tikva (Isr) 0-5 Braga (Por) (agg 0-7); Botev Plovdiv (Bul) 0-4 Panathinaikos (Gre) (agg 1-6); Elfsborg (Swe) 2-0 Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) (agg 3-0)

2024-25 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

First Qualifying Round – Main Path

Jul 10-11: Velez Mostar (Bih) 1-1 Inter Club d'Escalades (And); Auda (Lva) 2–0 B36 Torshavn (Fro); Floriana (Mal) 3-1 Tre Penne (Smr); Torpedo Zhodino (Blr) 2-4 Milsami Orhei (Mda); Siauliai (Ltu) 0-2 FCI Levadia (Est); Bala Town (Wal) 1–2 Paide Linnameeskond (Est); La Fiorita (Smr) 0–1 Isloch Minsk Raion (Blr); Caernarfon Town (Wal) 2–0 Crusaders (Nir); Tallinna Kalev (Est) 1–2 Urartu (Arm); Valur (Isl) 2–2 Vllaznia (Alb); Bruno's Magpies (Gib) 2–0 Derry City (Irl); Malisheva (Kos) 1–0 Buducnost Podgorica (Mne); Atletic d'Escaldes (And) 0–1 F91 Dudelange (Lux); Partizani (Alb) 1–1 Marsaxlokk (Mal); Stjarnan (Isl) 2–0 Linfield (Nir); Torpedo Kutaisi (Geo) 1–1 Tirana (Alb); Shelbourne (Irl) 2–1 St Joseph's (Gib); Aktobe (Kaz) 0–1 Sarajevo (Bih); Bravo (Svn) 0–1 Connah's Quay Nomads (Wal); Liepaja (Lva) 1–1 Vikingur Gota (Fro); Noah (Arm) 2–0 Shkendija (Mkd); Tikvesh (Mkd) 3–2 Breidablik (Isl); Mornar Bar (Mne) 2–1 Dinamo Tbilisi (Geo); UNA Strassen (Lux) 0–0 KuPS (Fin); VPS (Fin) 1–2 Zalgiris (Ltu)
Jul 18: Crusaders (Nir) 3-1 Caernarfon Town (Wal) (agg 3-3, *AET, Caernarfon Town win 8-7 on pens*); Inter Club d'Escalades (And) 5-1 Velez Mostar (Bih) (agg 6-2); Tre Penne (Smr) 1-1 Floriana (Mal) (agg 2-4); Milsami Orhei (Mda) 0-0 Torpedo Zhodino (Blr) (agg 4-2); FCI Levadia (Est) 0-0 Siauliai (Ltu) (agg 2-0); Paide Linnameeskond (Est) 1-1 Bala Town (Wal) (agg 3-2, *AET*); Isloch Minsk Raion (Blr) 0-1 La Fiorita (Smr) (agg 1-1, *AET, La Fiorita win 4-2 on pens*); Urartu (Arm) 2-0 Tallinna Kalev (Est) (agg 4-1); Vllaznia (Alb) 0-4 Valur (Isl) (agg 2-6); Derry City (Irl) 2-1 Bruno's Magpies (Gib) (agg 2-3, *AET*); Buducnost Podgorica (Mne) 3-0 Malisheva (Kos) (agg 3-1); F91 Dudelange (Lux) 2-0 Atletic d'Escaldes (And) (agg 3-0); Marsaxlokk (Mal) 1-2 Partizani (Alb) (agg 2-3); B36 Torshavn (Fro) 0-1 Auda (Lva) (agg 0-3); Linfield (Nir) 3-2 Stjarnan (Isl) (agg 3-4); Tirana (Alb) 0-1 Torpedo Kutaisi (Geo) (agg 1-2); St Joseph's (Gib) 1-1 Shelbourne (Irl) (agg 2-3); Sarajevo (Bih) 2-3 Aktobe (Kaz) (agg 3-3, *AET, Sarajevo win 4-3 on pens*); Connah's Quay Nomads (Wal) 0-2 Bravo (Svn) (agg 1-2, *AET*); Vikingur Gota (Fro) 2-0 Liepaja (Lva) (agg 3-1); Shkendija (Mkd) 1-2 Noah (Arm) (agg 1-4); Breidablik (Isl) 3-1 Tikvesh (Mkd) (agg 5-4); Dinamo Tbilisi (Geo) 1-1 Mornar Bar (Mne) (agg 2-3); KuPS (Fin) 5-0 UNA Strassen (Lux) (agg 5-0); Zalgiris (Ltu) 1-0 VPS (Fin) (agg 3-1)

Second Qualifying Round – Main Path

Jul 24-25: Dnipro-1 (Ukr) 0–3 (w/o) Puskas Akademia (Hun); AEK Athens (Gre) 4-3 Inter Club d'Escalades (And); Riga (Lva) 1–0 Slask Wroclaw (Pol); Cliftonville (Nir) 1-2 Auda (Lva); Go Ahead Eagles (Ned) 0–0 Brann (Nor); Omonia (Cyp) 3–1 Torpedo Kutaisi (Geo); Breidablik (Isl) 1-2 Drita (Kos); Osijek (Cro) 5-1 FCI Levadia (Est); Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) 2–0 Polissya Zhytomyr (Ukr); KuPS (Fin) 0-1 Tromso (Nor); Valur (Isl) 0-0 St Mirren (Sco); Sumgayit (Aze) 1–2 Fehervar (Hun); Ilves (Fin) 2–1 Austria Vienna (Aut); CSKA 1948 (Bul) 1-0 Buducnost Podgorica (Mne); Zira (Aze) 4-0 DAC (Svk); Maribor (Svn) 2-0 Universitatea Craiova (Rou); St Patrick's Athletic (Irl) 3–1 Vaduz (Lie); Bruno's Magpies (Gib) 0-3 Copenhagen (Den); Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) 6-1 La Fiorita (Smr); Legia Warsaw (Pol) 6-0 Caernarfon Town (Wal); Zalgiris (Ltu) 2-1 Pafos (Cyp); Djurgarden (Swe) 3–0 Progres Niederkorn (Lux); Gent (Bel) 4-1 Vikingur Gota (Fro); F91 Dudelange (Lux) 2-6 BK Hacken (Swe); Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr) 0–0 Cherno More (Bul); Hajduk Split (Cro) 2-0 HB Torshavn (Fro); Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 0-1 Bravo (Svn); Floriana (Mal) 0-1 Vitoria Guimaraes (Por); Stjarnan (Isl) 2-1 Paide Linnameeskond (Est); St Gallen (Sui) 4-1 Tobol (Kaz); Mlada Boleslav (Cze) 2–0 TransINVEST (Ltu); Noah (Arm) 7-0 Sliema Wanderers (Mal); Banik Ostrava (Cze) 5-1 Urartu (Arm); Zurich (Sui) 3-0 Shelbourne (Irl); Brondby (Den) 6-0 Llapi (Kos); CFR Cluj (Rou) 0–0 Neman Grodno (Blr); Zimbru Chisinau (Mda) 0–3 Ararat-Armenia (Arm); Radnicki 1923 (Srb) 1-0 Mornar Bar (Mne); Sarajevo (Bih) 0-0 Spartak Trnava (Svk); Maccabi Haifa (Isr) 0–3 Sabah (Aze); Paks (Hun) 3-0 AEK Larnaca (Cyp); Iberia 1999 (Geo) 2-0 Partizani (Alb); Milsami Orhei (Mda) 1-1 Astana (Kaz)
Jul 30-Aug 1: Puskas Akademia (Hun) 3-0 (w/o) Dnipro-1 (Ukr) (agg 6-0 w/o); Drita (Kos) 1-0 Breidablik (Isl) (agg 3-1); Fehervar (Hun) 0-0 Sumgayit (Aze) (agg 2-1); Austria Vienna (Aut) 4-3 Ilves (Fin) (agg 5-5, *AET, Ilves win 5-4 on pens*); BK Hacken (Swe) 6-1 F91 Dudelange (Lux) (agg 12-3); Auda (Lva) 2-0 Cliftonville (Nir) (agg 3-1); Mornar Bar (Mne) 2-1 Radnicki 1923 (Srb) (agg 2-2, *AET, Mornar Bar win 4-3 on pens*); Spartak Trnava (Svk) 3-0 Sarajevo (Bih) (agg 3-0); Inter Club d'Escalades (And) 0-4 AEK Athens (Gre) (agg 8-3); Slask Wroclaw (Pol) 3-1 Riga (Lva) (agg 3-2); Brann (Nor) 2-1 Go Ahead Eagles (Ned) (agg 2-1); Torpedo Kutaisi (Geo) 1-2 Omonia (Cyp) (agg 2-5); FCI Levadia (Est) 0-1 Osijek (Cro) (agg 1-6); Polissya Zhytomyr (Ukr) 1-2 Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) (agg 1-4); Tromso (Nor) 1-0 KuPS (Fin) (agg 2-0); St Mirren (Sco) 4-1 Valur (Isl) (agg 4-1); Buducnost Podgorica (Mne) 1-1 CSKA 1948 (Bul) (agg 1-2, *AET*); DAC (Svk) 1-2 Zira (Aze) (agg 1-6); Universitatea Craiova (Rou) 3-2 Maribor (Svn) (agg 3-4); Vaduz (Lie) 2-2 St Patrick's Athletic (Irl) (agg 3-5); Copenhagen (Den) 5-1 Bruno's Magpies (Gib) (agg 8-1); La Fiorita (Smr) 0-4 Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur) (agg 1-10); Caernarfon Town (Wal) 0-5 Legia Warsaw (Pol) (agg 0-11); Pafos (Cyp) 3-0 Zalgiris (Ltu) (agg 4-2, *AET*); Progres Niederkorn (Lux) 1-0 Djurgarden (Swe) (agg 1-3); Vikingur Gota (Fro) 0-3 Gent (Bel) (agg 1-7); Cherno More (Bul) 1-2 Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr) (agg 1-2); HB Torshavn (Fro) 0-0 Hajduk Split (Cro) (agg 0-2); Bravo (Svn) 1-3 Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) (agg 2-3); Vitoria Guimaraes (Por) 4-0 Floriana (Mal) (agg 5-0); Paide Linnameeskond (Est) 4-0 Stjarnan (Isl) (agg 5-2); Tobol (Kaz) 0-1 St Gallen (Sui) (agg 1-5); TransINVEST (Ltu) 0-1 Mlada Boleslav (Cze) (agg 0-3); Sliema Wanderers (Mal) 0-0 Noah (Arm) (agg 0-7); Urartu (Arm) 0-2 Banik Ostrava (Cze) (agg 1-7); Shelbourne (Irl) 0-0 Zurich (Sui) (agg 0-3); Llapi (Kos) 2-2 Brondby (Den) (agg 2-8); Neman Grodno (Blr) 0-5 CFR Cluj (Rou) (agg 0-5); Ararat-Armenia (Arm) 3-1 Zimbru Chisinau (Mda) (agg 6-1); Sabah (Aze) 3-6 Maccabi Haifa

(Isr) (agg 6-6, *AET, Sabah win 3-2 on pens*); AEK Larnaca (Cyp) 0-2 Paks (Hun) (agg 0-5); Partizani (Alb) 0-0 Iberia 1999 (Geo) (agg 0-2); Astana (Kaz) 1-0 Milsami Orhei (Mda) (agg 1-0)

Second Qualifying Round – Champions Path

Jul 23-25: Ballkani (Kos) 0-0 Hamrun Spartans (Mal); Differdange 03 (Lux) 1-0 Ordabasy (Kaz); Virtus (Smr) 0-0 Flora (Est); Struga (Mkd) 2-1 Pyunik (Arm); Dinamo Batumi (Geo) 0-2 Decic (Mne); Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) 0-1 Egnatia (Alb)
Jul 30-Aug 1: Flora (Est) 5-2 Virtus (Smr) (agg 5-2, *AET*); Pyunik (Arm) 3-1 Struga (Mkd) (agg 4-3); Decic (Mne) 0-0 Dinamo Batumi (Geo) (agg 2-0); Hamrun Spartans (Mal) 0-2 Ballkani (Kos) (agg 0-2); Ordabasy (Kaz) 4-3 Differdange 03 (Lux) (agg 4-4, *AET, Ordabasy win 4-3 on pens*); Egnatia (Alb) 0-2 Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl) (agg 0-3)

SOUTH AMERICA

2024 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Knockout Round Play-Offs

Jul 16-18: Rosario Central (Arg) 1-0 Internacional (Bra); Huachipato (Chi) 2-3 Racing (Uru); Barcelona (Ecu) 1-1 Red Bull Bragantino (Bra); Libertad (Par) 2-0 Universidad Catolica (Ecu); Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 0-0 Boca Juniors (Arg); Cerro Porteno (Par) 1-1 Athletico Paranaense (Bra); Palestino (Chi) 1-1 Cuiaba (Bra); LDU (Ecu) 3-0 Always Ready (Bol)
Jul 23-25: Internacional (Bra) 1-1 Rosario Central (Arg) (agg 1-2); Racing (Uru) 0-1 Huachipato (Chi) (agg 3-3, *Huachipato win 3-0 on pens*); Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 3-2 Barcelona (Ecu) (agg 4-3); Universidad Catolica (Ecu) 1-1 Libertad (Par) (agg 1-3); Boca Juniors (Arg) 1-0 Independiente del Valle (Ecu) (agg 1-0); Athletico Paranaense (Bra) 2-1 Cerro Porteno (Par) (agg 3-2); Cuiaba (Bra) 1-2 Palestino (Chi) (agg 2-3); Always Ready (Bol) 3-1 LDU (Ecu) (agg 3-4)

URUGUAY

Intermedio Serie A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Penarol	7	4	2	1	10	5	14
Wanderers	7	4	1	2	11	9	13
Defensor Sporting	7	3	2	2	7	5	11
Fenix	7	3	1	3	10	9	10
River Plate	7	2	2	3	8	9	8
Progreso	7	2	2	3	8	11	8
Racing	7	1	3	3	8	10	6
Deportivo Maldonado	7	1	3	3	5	9	6

Intermedio Serie B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nacional (C)	7	5	1	1	18	5	16
Danubio	7	4	2	1	11	11	14
Cerro Largo	7	3	2	2	6	7	11
Cerro	7	3	1	3	8	5	10
Miramar Misiones	7	3	1	3	7	10	10
Rampla Juniors	7	2	2	3	8	12	8
Boston River	7	2	1	4	6	8	7
Liverpool	7	1	0	6	4	10	3

• *Two group winners advance to final*

Final

Aug 4:
Nacional 1-1 Penarol (*Nacional win 8-7 on pens*)

AFRICA

CAPE VERDE

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Academico do Sal*	6	3	1	2	9	8	10
Academica do Fogo	6	2	2	2	11	6	8
Rosariense	6	2	2	2	5	7	8
Juventude do Norte	6	1	3	2	8	12	6

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Palmeira*	6	3	3	0	13	5	12
Morabeza	6	2	3	1	7	7	9
Barreirense	6	2	2	2	8	8	8
Varandinha	6	0	2	4	7	15	2

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Boavista*	6	5	1	0	12	2	16
Derby*	6	3	2	1	7	4	11
Ultramarina	6	1	1	4	5	13	4
Os Sanjoanenses	6	0	2	4	3	8	2

*All advance to finals stage

Semi-Finals

Jun 22-23:
Academico do Sal 1-0 Derby;
Palmeira 1-1 Boavista
Jun 29:
Derby 4-1 Academico do Sal (agg 4-2);
Boavista 0-0 Palmeira (agg 1-1, *Boavista win on away goals*)

Final

Jul 13: Boavista 2-1 Derby

COMOROS

Ngazidja Group

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
US Zilimadjou	22	14	5	3	44	19	47
Volcan Club	22	14	4	4	37	15	46
Alize Fort	22	11	4	7	24	22	37
Djabal	22	10	7	5	34	17	37
Etoile des Comores	22	11	4	7	41	29	37
Male	22	9	5	8	29	27	32
Hantsindzi	22	10	2	10	25	30	32
Atomic Ngome	22	8	6	8	35	36	30
Twamaya	22	8	4	10	20	24	28
Mlaouni	22	8	3	11	29	41	27
Hahaya	22	5	1	16	23	42	16
Mtsamdou	22	1	1	20	14	53	4

Mwali Group

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Etoile du Centre	14	12	0	2	30	8	36
Fomboni	14	7	4	3	21	7	25
Belle Lumiere	14	6	3	5	19	15	21
Coca Bole	14	6	3	5	14	15	21
Mbatse Club	14	6	1	7	20	22	19
Ouragan Club	14	5	2	7	14	18	17
JUNO Club	14	3	5	6	14	28	14
FCN Espoir	14	1	2	11	7	26	5

Ndzuani Group

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Etoile d'Or	18	11	4	3	21	11	37
Steal Nouvel	18	8	7	3	24	10	31
Mrango Club	18	9	4	5	26	16	31
Gombessa Sport	18	8	6	4	33	20	30
Ouani	18	9	3	6	27	23	30
Ngazi Sport	18	6	6	6	25	19	24
US de Bambao M'tsamga	18	5	7	6	18	26	22
Chirazienne	18	5	5	8	11	20	20
Singani	18	3	5	10	22	28	14
Cafe Sport	18	1	3	14	21	55	6

• *Three group winners advance to national group*

National Group

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
US Zilimadjou (C)	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Etoile d'Or	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Etoile du Centre	2	0	0	2	2	5	0

GUINEA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Milo (C)	26	16	5	5	45	28	53
Hafia	26	14	6	6	49	31	48
ASM Sangaredi	26	12	8	6	42	27	44
Kaloum Star	26	12	7	7	31	29	43
CI Kamsar	26	11	6	9	42	35	39
Horoya	26	10	7	9	25	20	37
Ashanti GB	26	8	9	9	26	27	33
Flamme Olympique	26	7	11	8	24	27	32
Wakirya	26	8	7	11	28	32	31
Loubha Telimele	26	9	3	14	26	34	30
Renaissance	26	7	9	10	19	27	30
SOAR Coyah	26	7	7	12	20	29	28
Sequence (R)	26	7	6	13	26	35	27
Gangan (R)	26	6	5	15	15	37	23

LIBYA

Group One

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Nasr	18	11	4	3	29	13	37
Al Ahli Benghazi*	18	11	4	3	32	15	34
Al Hilal	18	10	2	6	27	20	32
Al Akhdar*	18	8	5	5	34	21	26
Al Ta'awon	18	7	5	6	17	22	26
Al Anwar	18	6	1	11	17	29	19
Al Sadaqa	18	4	6	8	19	24	18
Al Tahaddi	18	4	6	8	12	24	18
Al Morooj	18	4	5	9	18	25	17
Al Suqoor (R)	18	4	4	10	16	28	16

*Deducted 3 points
• *Top three advance to championship round*

Group Two

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ahli Tripoli	20	15	3	2	29	7	48
Asswehly	20	9	5	6	23	14	32
Al Madina	20	9	4	7	21	20	31
Al Ittihad*	20	7	10	3	21	14	28
Al Ittihad Misurata	20	6	8	6	23	20	26
Olympic Azzaweya	20	5	8	7	18	21	23
Abu Salim	20	4	10	6	17	22	22
Al Khmes	20	4	8	8	13	21	20
Al Malaab El Libby	20	4	7	9	16	21	19
Al Bashaer Club	20	4	7	9	15	26	19
Asaria (R)	20	2	12	6	18	28	18

*Deducted 3 points
• *Top three advance to championship round*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Nasr (C)	5	5	0	0	8	2	15
Al Ahli Benghazi	5	2	2	1	9	5	8
Al Ahli Tripoli	5	2	1	2	6	6	7
Al Hilal	5	1	3	1	4	4	6
Asswehly	5	1	1	3	8	10	4
Al Madina	5	0	1	4	4	12	1

MAURITIUS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cercle de Joachim (C)	18	14	3	1	55	11	45
Pamplemousses	18	10	4	4	30	13	34
ASPL 2000	18	8	3	7	27	24	27
Grande Riviere Sud Est	18	8	3	7	23	25	27
Chebel Citizens	18	8	2	8	18	18	26
Petite Riviere Noire	18	7	3	8	27	26	24
ASVP	18	6	3	9	22	28	21
Entente Boulet Rouge	18	6	2	10	25	46	20
ASRR (R)	18	5	3	10	23	30	18
Savanne (R)	18	3	4	11	28	57	13

NIGER

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
ASGNN (C)	32	22	7	3	65	17	73
ASFAN	32	21	7	4	47	18	70
Nigelec	32	17	10	5	37	19	61
Douanes Niamey	32	15	9	8	35	21	54
US Gendarmerie	32	12	14	6	40	31	50
Sahel	32	12	12	9	34	35	45
Police	32	10	12	10	27	23	42
Urana	32	8	15	9	28	28	39
Jangorzo	32	8	13	11	32	37	37
Renaissance	32	9	9	14	21	38	36
Olympic Niamey	32	7	14	11	28	32	35
Espoir	32	8	9	15	19	35	33
Tahoua	32	8	9	15	36	51	33
Liberte	32	4	19	9	26	36	31
Zumunta (R)	32	6	12	14	24	36	30
Tagour Provincial Club (R)	32	7	8	17	19	38	29
Akokana (R)	32	5	9	18	23	46	24

SIERRA LEONE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bo Rangers (C)	34	23	7	4	56	19	76
Bhantal	34	17	10	7	33	20	61
Kallon	34	17	9	8	45	24	60
Wusum Stars	34	15	9	10	39	24	54
Ports Authority	34	13	13	8	40	34	52
East End Lions	34	12	15	7	38	25	51
Old Edwardians	34	11	15	8	34	25	48
Wilberforce Strikers	34	11	13	10	31	25	46
Luawa	34	12	10	12	32	39	46
Freetonians SLIFA	34	11	12	11	31	32	45
Mighty Blackpool	34	12	9	13	28	33	45
Diamond Stars	34	12	9	13	27	32	45
Bai Bureh Warriors	34	9	13	12	23	26	40
Lamboi	34	10	10	14	28	35	40
Freetown City	34	6	14	14	21	35	32
Real Republicans (R)	34	7	11	16	31	53	32
Kholifa Stars (R)	33	6	6	21	22	44	24
Kahunla Rangers (R)	33	6	5	22	18	52	23

SOMALIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dekedaha (C)	22	15	7	0	48	13	52
Horseed	22	13	5	4	35	16	44
Mogadishu City	22	12	7	3	39	16	43
Elman	22	10	8	4	36	22	38
Gaadiidka	22	10	6	6	42	30	36
Heegan	22	9	6	7	38	26	33
Jeenyo	22	8	7	7	26	32	31
Raadsan	22	6	5	11	29	42	23
KIGS	22	4	6	12	30	40	18
Badbaado	22	4	5	13	26	47	17
Midnimo (R)	22	4	4	14	51	47	16
Sahafi (R)	22	3	2	17	20	69	11

ASIA

2024-25 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

Preliminary Qualifier

Aug 6: Sepahan (Irn) 1-4 Shabab Al Ahli (UAE)

Qualifying Play-Offs

Aug 13: Al Gharafa (Qat) 1-0 Shabab Al Ahli (UAE); Shandong Taishan (Chn) 1-1 Bangkok United (Tha) *(Shandong Taishan win 4-3 on pens)*

League Phase

West Region

Al Ain (UAE), Al Hilal (KSA), Al Nassr (KSA), Al Ahli (KSA), Al Sadd (Qat), Al Rayyan (Qat), Persepolis (Irn), Esteghlal (Irn), Al Wasl (UAE), Pakhtakor (Uzb), Al Shorta (Irq), Al Gharafa (Qat)

East Region

Vissel Kobe (Jpn), Kawasaki Frontale (Jpn), Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn), Ulsan HD (Kor), Pohang Steelers (Kor), Gwangju (Kor), Shanghai Port (Chn), Shanghai Shenhua (Chn), Buriram United (Tha), Central Coast Mariners (Aus), Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas), Shandong Taishan (Chn)

2024-25 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

Qualifying Play-Offs

Aug 14: East Bengal (Ind) 2-3 Altyn Asyr (Tkm); Al Ahli (Bhr) 0-1 Al Kuwait (Kuw)

League Phase

West Region

Al Taawoun (KSA), Al Wakrah (Qat), Tractor (Irn), Sharjah (UAE), Nasaf Qarshi (Uzb), Al Quwa Al Jawiya (Irq), Al Hussein Irbid (Jor), Al Wehdat (Jor), Istiklol (Tjk), Ravshan Kulob (Tjk), Mohun Bagan (Ind), Al Khaldiya (Bhr), Sepahan (Irn), Shabab Al Ahli (UAE), Altyn Asyr (Tkm), Al Kuwait (Kuw)

East Region

Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn), Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor), Zhejiang (Chn), Sydney FC (Aus), Port (Tha), Muangthong United (Tha), Selangor (Mas), Thep Xanh Nam Dinh (Vie), Lee Man (Hkg), Eastern (Hkg), Kaya Iloilo (Phi), DH Cebu (Phi), Lion City Sailors (Sgp), Tampines Rovers (Sgp), Persib (Idn), Bangkok United (Tha)

2024-25 AFC CHALLENGE LEAGUE

Qualifying Play-Offs

Aug 14: Abdysh-Ata Kant (Kgz) 2-0 Attack Energy (Afg); Church Boys United (Nep) 1-2 Paro (Bhu)

League Phase

West Region

Al Arabi (Kuw), Arkadag (Tkm), Nejmeh (Lbn), Al Fotuwa (Irq), Bashundhara Kings (Ban), Al Seeb (Oma), Maziya (Mdv), Hilal Al Quds (Ple), East Bengal (Ind), Al Ahli (Bhr), Abdysh-Ata Kant (Kgz), Paro (Bhu)

East Region

Madura United (Idn), Shan United (Mya), Preah Khan Reach Svay Rieng (Cam), Taiwan Steel (Tpe), Young Elephants (Lao), SP Falcons (Mng)

IRAQ

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Shorta (C)	38	26	9	3	76	36	87
Al Quwa Al Jawiya	38	24	10	4	68	32	82
Al Zawra'a	38	21	12	5	54	23	75
Al Najaf	38	19	10	9	45	28	67
Zakho	38	17	16	5	37	20	67
Duhok	38	14	16	8	41	33	58
Newroz	38	15	11	12	61	49	56
Al Talaba	38	13	14	11	40	38	53
Al Hudood	38	13	11	14	37	46	50
Naft Maysan	38	10	17	11	40	39	47
Al Naft	38	10	16	12	37	44	46
Al Minaa	38	10	12	16	38	59	42
Al Kahrabaa	38	8	17	13	47	51	41
Erbil	38	9	14	15	46	50	41
Al Karkh	38	7	18	13	36	45	39
Karbala	38	8	13	17	39	60	37
Al Qasim*	38	8	14	16	42	53	35
Naft Al Basra**	38	8	10	20	29	46	34
Amanat Baghdad (R)	38	6	13	19	33	53	31
Naft Al Wasat (R)	38	1	13	24	24	65	16

*Deducted 3 points and enter relegation play-out
**Enter relegation play-out

Relegation Play-Out
Jul 20: Al Qasim 1-2 Naft Al Basra

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off
Jul 24: Peshmerga Sulaymaniya 1-2 Al Qasim

MACAU

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
CPK	9	8	1	0	49	2	25
Benfica	9	8	0	1	37	8	24
Cheng Fung	9	6	2	1	18	6	20
Hang Sai	9	4	1	4	16	22	13
Lun Lok	9	4	1	4	20	28	13
Universidade de Macau	9	4	1	4	14	18	13
Monte Carlo	9	3	1	5	10	15	10
Jia Hua	9	2	1	6	17	17	7
Tak Chun Ka I	9	1	0	8	10	44	3
Sporting Macau	9	0	2	7	8	39	2

• *Top five enter championship round, bottom five enter relegation round with points carried over in full*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Benfica (C)	17	15	1	1	74	15	46
CPK	17	13	3	1	84	11	42
Cheng Fung	17	9	4	4	38	20	31
Hang Sai	17	6	1	10	33	57	19
Lun Lok	17	4	2	11	26	78	14

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Universidade de Macau	17	9	1	7	31	27	28
Jia Hua	17	8	3	6	46	23	27
Monte Carlo	17	6	4	7	27	23	22
Sporting Macau (R)	17	3	3	11	23	54	9
Tak Chun Ka I (R)	17	1	0	16	15	89	3

PHILIPPINES

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kaya-Iloilo (C)	14	13	1	0	82	5	40
Dynamic Herb Cebu	14	12	0	2	66	9	36
Stallion Laguna	14	10	2	2	65	12	32
Davao Aguilas	14	10	2	2	39	6	32
One Taguig	14	9	4	1	69	14	31
United City	14	9	3	2	51	13	30
Manila Digger	14	8	0	6	35	25	24
Loyola	14	5	1	8	32	45	16
Maharlika Taguig	14	5	1	8	23	53	16
Mendiola	14	4	1	9	27	46	13
DB Garelli United	14	4	0	10	15	85	12
Tuloy (R)	14	3	0	11	28	52	9
Philippine Air Force (R)	14	3	0	11	19	59	9
Philippine Army (R)	14	2	1	11	15	42	7
Manila Montet (R)	14	0	0	14	3	103	0

CONCACAF

2024 LEAGUES CUP

East 1
Jul 28-Aug 5: New York City FC (USA) 0-0 Queretaro (Mex) (*New York City FC win 4-3 on pens*); FC Cincinnati (USA) 1-0 Queretaro (Mex); FC Cincinnati (USA) 4-2 New York City FC (USA)

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
Cincinnati (Q)	2	2	0	0	0	+3	6
New York City (Q)	2	0	1	0	1	-2	2
Queretaro	2	0	0	1	1	-1	1

East 2
Jul 26-Aug 4: Orlando City (USA) 4-1 CF Montreal (Can); Atletico San Luis (Mex) 2-3 CF Montreal (Can); Orlando City (USA) 1-1 Atletico San Luis (Mex) (*Orlando City win 5-4 on pens*)

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
Orlando City (Q)	2	1	1	0	0	+3	5
CF Montreal (Q)	2	1	0	0	1	-2	3
Atletico San Luis	2	0	0	1	1	-1	1

East 3
Jul 27-Aug 3: Puebla (Mex) 0-2 Inter Miami (USA); Tigres UANL (Mex) 2-1 Puebla (Mex); Tigres UANL (Mex) 2-1 Inter Miami (USA)

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
Tigres UANL (Q)	2	2	0	0	0	+2	6
Inter Miami (Q)	2	1	0	0	1	+1	3
Puebla	2	0	0	0	2	-3	0

East 4
Jul 27-Aug 4: Philadelphia Union (USA) 1-0 Charlotte FC (USA); Charlotte FC (USA) 0-0 Cruz Azul (Mex) (*Charlotte FC win 4-2 on pens*); Philadelphia Union (USA) 1-1 Cruz Azul (Mex) (*Cruz Azul win 5-3 on pens*)

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
Philadelphia (Q)	2	1	0	1	0	+1	4
Cruz Azul (Q)	2	0	1	1	0	0	3
Charlotte FC	2	0	1	0	1	-1	2

East 5
Jul 27-Aug 6: New England Revolution (USA) 1-0 Mazatlan (Mex); Nashville SC (USA) 0-2 Mazatlan (Mex); New England Revolution (USA) 1-1 Nashville SC (USA) (*New England Revolution win 5-4 on pens*)

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
New England (Q)	2	1	1	0	0	+1	5
Mazatlan (Q)	2	1	0	0	1	+1	3
Nashville SC	2	0	0	1	1	-2	1

East 6
Jul 27-Aug 4: New York Red Bulls (USA) 0-0 Toronto FC (Can) (*Toronto FC win 5-4 on pens*); Pachuca (Mex) 1-1 New York Red Bulls (USA) (*Pachuca win 5-4 on pens*); Pachuca (Mex) 1-2 Toronto FC (Can)

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
Toronto FC (Q)	2	1	1	0	0	+1	5
Pachuca (Q)	2	0	1	0	1	-1	2
New York RB	2	0	0	2	0	0	2

East 7
Jul 26-Aug 4: Atlanta United (USA) 3-3 D.C. United (USA) (*D.C. United win 6-5 on pens*); Santos Laguna (Mex) 0-3 D.C. United (USA); Atlanta United (USA) 0-0 Santos Laguna (Mex) (*Santos Laguna win 6-5 on pens*)

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
D.C. United (Q)	2	1	1	0	0	+3	5
Santos Laguna (Q)	2	0	1	0	1	-3	2
Atlanta United	2	0	0	2	0	0	2

West 1
Jul 26-Aug 3: UNAM Pumas (Mex) 2-3 Austin FC (USA); Monterrey (Mex) 0-2 Austin FC (USA); Monterrey (Mex) 1-1 UNAM Pumas (Mex) (*UNAM Pumas win 3-0 on pens*)

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
Austin FC (Q)	2	2	0	0	0	+3	6
UNAM (Q)	2	0	1	0	1	-1	2
Monterrey	2	0	0	1	1	-2	1

West 2
Jul 27-Aug 4: Guadalajara (Mex) 1-1 San Jose Earthquakes (USA) 1 (*San Jose Earthquakes win 4-3 on pens*); San Jose Earthquakes (USA) 1-2 LA Galaxy (USA); Guadalajara (Mex) 2-2 LA Galaxy (USA) (*LA Galaxy win 5-4 on pens*)

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
LA Galaxy (Q)	2	1	1	0	0	+1	5
San Jose (Q)	2	0	1	0	1	-1	2
Guadalajara	2	0	0	2	0	0	2

West 3
Jul 27-Aug 4: St Louis City (USA) 2-1 FC Dallas (USA); FC Dallas (USA) 0-2 Juarez (Mex); St Louis City (USA) 1-1 Juarez (Mex) (*Juarez win 4-1 on pens*)

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
Juarez (Q)	2	1	1	0	0	+2	5
St Louis City (Q)	2	1	0	1	0	+1	4
FC Dallas	2	0	0	0	2	-3	0

West 4
Jul 28-Aug 5: Sporting Kansas City (USA) 2-1 Chicago Fire (USA); Toluca (Mex) 3-1 Chicago Fire (USA); Toluca (Mex) 2-1 Sporting Kansas City (USA)

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
Toluca (Q)	2	2	0	0	0	+3	6
Kansas City (Q)	2	1	0	0	1	0	3
Chicago Fire	2	0	0	0	2	-3	0

West 5
Jul 28-Aug 5: Leon (Mex) 1-2 Portland Timbers (USA); Portland Timbers (USA) 4-0 Colorado Rapids (USA); Leon (Mex) 1-1 Colorado Rapids (USA) (*Colorado Rapids win 4-3 on pens*)

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
Portland (Q)	2	2	0	0	0	+5	6
Colorado (Q)	2	0	1	0	1	-4	2
Leon	2	0	0	1	1	-1	1

West 6
Jul 26-Aug 4: Seattle Sounders (USA) 2-0 Minnesota United (USA); Minnesota United (USA) 1-0 Necaxa (Mex); Seattle Sounders (USA) 1-3 Necaxa (Mex)

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
Necaxa (Q)	2	1	0	0	1	+1	3
Seattle (Q)	2	1	0	0	1	0	3
Minnesota	2	1	0	0	1	-1	3

West 7
Jul 26-Aug 3: LAFC (USA) 3-0 Tijuana (Mex); LAFC (USA) 2-2 Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) (*Vancouver Whitecaps win 4-2 on pens*); Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 3-1 Tijuana (Mex)

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
Vancouver (Q)	2	1	1	0	0	+2	5
LAFC (Q)	2	1	0	1	0	+3	4
Tijuana	2	0	0	0	2	-5	0

West 8
Jul 27-Aug 5: Houston Dynamo (USA) 0-1 Atlas (Mex); Real Salt Lake (USA) 2-1 Atlas (Mex); Houston Dynamo (USA) 3-0 Real Salt Lake (USA)

	P	W	PW	PL	L	GD	Pts
Houston (Q)	2	1	0	0	1	+2	3
Atlas (Q)	2	1	0	0	1	0	3
Real Salt Lake	2	1	0	0	1	-2	3

2024 CARIBBEAN CLUB SHIELD

Preliminary Round
Jul 25-26:
SWA Sharks (Tca) 1–0 Paradise (Grn); BAYS FC (Lca) 1–0 SCSA Eagles (SMA); Grenades (Atg) 6–2 Guyana Defence Force (Guy); Junior Stars (Smn) 0–2 CCCUL Dublanc (Dma)

Round of 16
Jul 27-28: Metropolitan (Pur) 2–0 SWA Sharks (Tca); Atletico Pantoja (Dom) 1–0 Defence Force (Tri); Racing Club Aruba (Aru) 1–2 Arnett Gardens (Jam); Jong Holland (Cuw) 3–0 BAYS FC (Lca); Real Rincon (Boe) 1–2 Grenades (Atg); Robinhood (Sur) 4–1 Etoile Matoury (Guf); Scholars International (Cay) 0–3 CCCUL Dublanc (Dma); America des Cayes (Hai) p-p Rams Village Superstars (Skn) (*Rams Village Superstars awarded walkover)*

Quarter-Finals
Jul 30: Metropolitan (Pur) 0-1 Atletico Pantoja (Dom); Arnett Gardens (Jam) 7-1 Jong Holland (Cuw); Grenades (Atg) 2-1 Robinhood (Sur); Rams Village Superstars (Skn) 2-2 CCCUL Dublanc (Dma) (*CCCUL Dublanc win 5-3 on pens)*

Semi-Finals
Aug 2: Atletico Pantoja (Dom) 1-2 Arnett Gardens (Jam); Grenades (Atg) 1-0 CCCUL Dublanc (Dma)

Third Place Play-Off
Aug 4: Atletico Pantoja (Dom) 1-1 CCCUL Dublanc (Dma) (*Atletico Pantoja win 9-8 on pens)*

Final
Aug 4: Arnett Gardens (Jam) 1-0 Grenades (Atg)

2024 CENTRAL AMERICAN CUP

Group A
Jul 30: Diriangen (Nca) 2–1 Motagua (Hon); Herediano (Crc) 1-0 Tauro (Pan)
Aug 6-7: Motagua (Hon) 3-2 San Francisco (Pan); Diriangen (Nca) 0-1 Herediano (Crc)

Group B
Jul 31-Aug 1: Luis Angel Firpo (Slv) 1-1 Comunicaciones (Gua); Alajuelense (Crc) 3-1 Marathon (Hon)
Aug 7: Luis Angel Firpo (Slv) 3-4 Alajuelense (Crc); Comunicaciones (Gua) 1-0 Alianza (Slv)

Group C
Jul 30-Aug 1: Port Layola (Blz) 1–4 Antigua (Gua); Olimpia (Hon) 3-0 Independiente (Pan)
Aug 6-8: Antigua (Gua) 0-0 Aguila (Slv); Port Layola (Blz) 1-6 Olimpia (Hon)

Group D
Jul 31: Managua (Nca) 1–0 Municipal (Gua); Saprissa (Crc) 5-0 Guanacasteca (Crc)
Aug 6-8: Managua (Nca) 2-3 Saprissa (Crc); Municipal (Gua) 1-1 Real Esteli (Nca)

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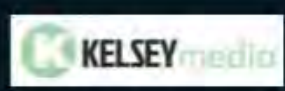

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